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Dime New York Library



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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XIV.

Published Every
Week.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., March 29, 1882.

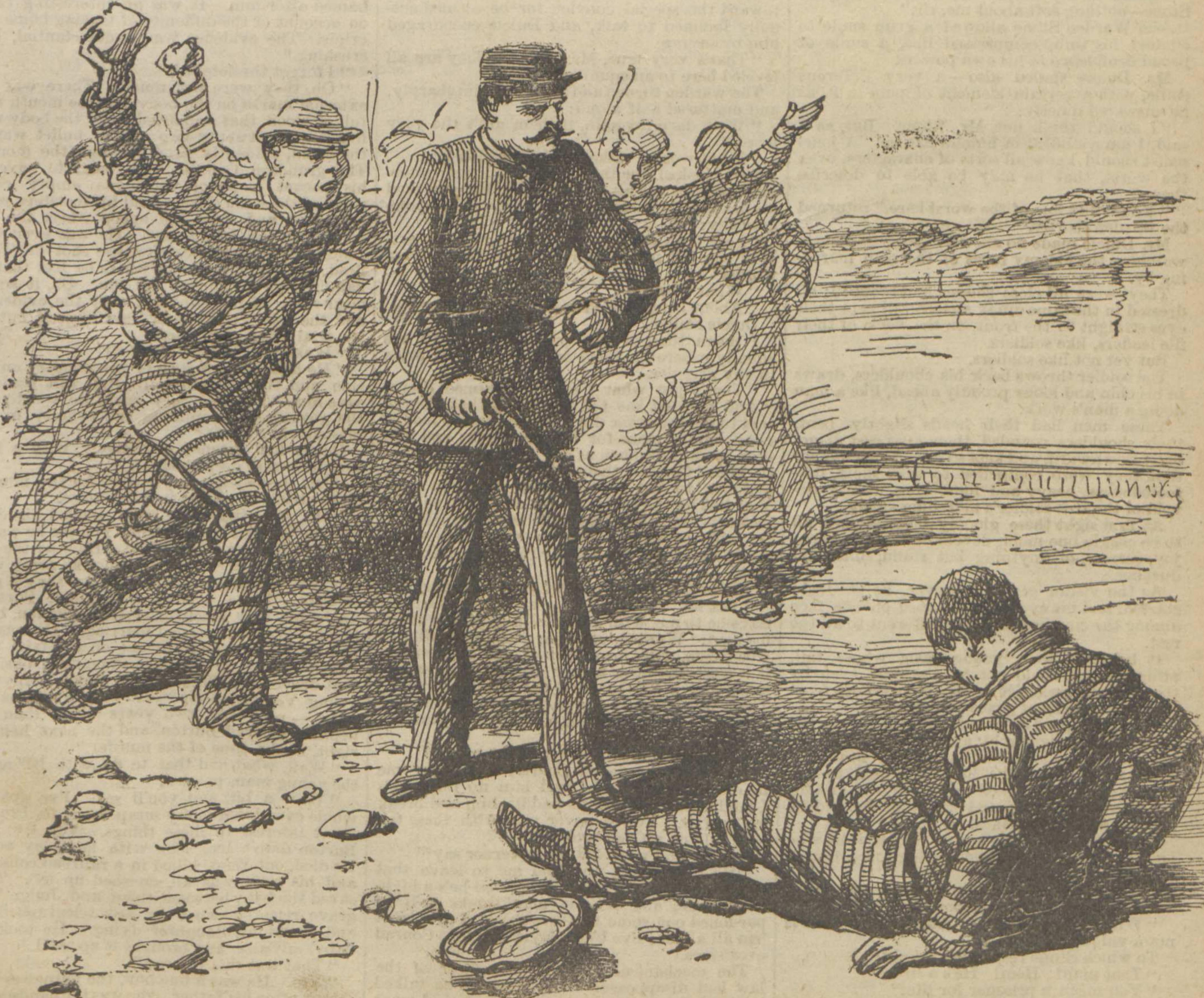
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No. 179

CONRAD, THE CONVICT; or, Was He Guilty?

A STORY OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

BY PROF. STEWART GILDERSLEEVE, LL.D.



THE MUTINY OF THE CONVICTS.

Conrad, the Convict;

OR,

WAS HE GUILTY?

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BY PROF. STEWART GILDERSLEEVE, LL.D.

CHAPTER I.

THE LIFER'S STORY.

"THAT fellow? Hem! He's a *lifer*."

The speaker was a tall, heavily-built man with a stern, rugged face, and cold, cruel eyes. His close-cut hair and short side-whiskers of iron-gray, his thin, compressed lips, and the resolute attitude in which he stood, marked the man long used to despotic authority over those beneath him, and to unflinching obedience to the harshest orders of those above him.

You might be sure that such a man would never question the supremacy of LAW; never be troubled with scruples of conscience in executing its orders. From the crown of his head to the thick sole of his heavy boot, he was the embodiment of the Jack-in-office.

The person whose question he had just answered was a quiet-looking young man, and they were looking at a long file of convicts, in gray-and-brown-striped uniform, moving silently by at the lock-step of the prison regulations, on their way to work after dinner.

The young man was a visitor on duty for a New York paper—the stern man, one of the wardens sent to escort him round the prison; and Maurice Dulcie could not help thinking, during the whole of his tour of inspection, that he was regarded with dislike and some contempt by his companion, from the abrupt way in which the latter spoke and a certain impatient glance that escaped him from time to time as he hurried the journalist along from place to place.

When at length Mr. Dulcie wanted to stop and watch the faces of the men going to work, he felt constrained to excuse himself by saying to the grim warden:

"I am a student of human nature, Mr.—ah—*I* beg your pardon, but I don't know your name."

"Stone is my name, sir, Stone—Hardy S. Stone—nothing soft about me, sir."

And Warden Stone allowed a grim smile to contort his thin, compressed lips, a smile of proud confidence in his own powers.

Mr. Dulcie smiled also—a very different smile, with a certain element of pain in it, as he answered quietly:

"I should think not, Mr. Stone. But, as I said, I am a student of human nature. A journalist should know all sorts of characters, even the worst, that he may be able to describe them."

"You'll find lots of the worst here," returned the warden shortly. "We get 'em all."

Mr. Dulcie made no answer. He was silently watching the gloomy faces of the men marching by.

They were all close shaven and cropped; all dressed in the same dingy stripes; all kept their eyes straight to the front, on the back of their file leaders, like soldiers.

But yet not like soldiers.

The soldier throws back his shoulders, draws in his chin and looks proudly ahead, like a man doing a man's work.

These men had their heads slightly bent, their shoulders rounded, their eyes cast diagonally downward, and kept so close to each other that they were compelled to take short, flat-footed steps, heavy and lumbering, utterly devoid of the free soldier's marching swing.

At first sight these gloomy faces seemed all to be cast in one mold, devoid of hope, passion, joy, sorrow, of anything but stolid, sullen endurance.

As the visitor gazed, however, he suddenly started, and his eyes were riveted on one face among the convicts that was different to all the rest.

It belonged to a young man, whose tall, athletic figure could not be disguised even by the degrading convict dress, but stood out from the rest, a model of grace and strength.

Closely cropped as was his hair, it shone in the sunlight like bright gold; and his profile was like that of a Greek statue in its haughty beauty.

He alone, of all the long line, held up his head, as if he disdained to look down, and his lip wore a certain prou' curl, that showed he scorned his surroundings.

He looked more like a prisoner of war, who had surrendered to overpowering force, than a Sing Sing convict.

The visitor watched him eagerly, and, when he had passed, said to the warden:

"What a grand face! Surely that man is not a vulgar criminal."

To which Stone responded grimly:

"That man? Hem! He's a *lifer*."

"You mean a prisoner for life?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dear me! dear me!" ejaculated the kind-hearted Dulcie. "A prisoner for life! And the poor lad does not look more than twenty. Oh, what a prospect!"

The warden shrugged his shoulders.

"That was his look-out. Men don't get a life sentence for nothing."

"But what did he do?" asked Dulcie. "He looks so different from the rest. He has the air of an educated and refined man."

"Eddication don't keep them that's born bad from goin' to the bad," retorted Stone, gruffly. "He was darned lucky that he didn't swing for what he did. Why, sir, that man's a *murderer*."

The young man uttered an exclamation of horror as the warden spoke in a tone as if he had settled the whole matter and wanted to drop the subject.

"A murderer! That youth! I would not have believed it. There must have been some mistake. He doesn't look like a murderer."

"There warn't no mistake," replied Stone, doggedly. "He had a fair trial, and the jury found him guilty without leavin' the box. The Guv'nor give him all he could ask for, when he commuted the sentence; and he's a darned sight better off nor he deserves."

"Whom was he accused of killing?" the visitor asked in a low tone. It was noticeable that he did not ask: "Whom did he kill?" and the warden retorted:

"He killed his own grandfather to git his money, and they traced it to him, that's what's the matter, sir. Ob, he's a deep one, that Conrad. You ain't the *fu't* man he's taken in with that face of hisn. But he can't fool me."

The journalist looked thoughtfully after the line of convicts, and asked:

"Is he a troublesome prisoner? Is he ever refractory? I mean does he obey orders and work quietly like the rest?"

"I'd like to see any of 'em do anything else," answered Stone, boastingly. "Them lifers is all in my gang, and, I tell you, they have to mind themselves. No, I can't say Conrad's any trouble. He does his work well enough."

He spoke indifferently, as if he grudged any praise to a convict, and presently added irritably:

"I wouldn't care if he warn't so high and mighty. The likes of him ain't no call to put on airs."

It was evident that there was some secret cause of irritation in the mind of the warden toward this special convict, for he seemed actually inclined to talk, and Dulcie encouraged him by saying:

"That's very true, Mr. Stone. They are all leveled here to an equality of woe."

The warden turned and looked at him sharply, and muttered half aloud:

"Well, darn my skin, if them ain't the very words!"

"What words?" asked Dulcie, curiously.

Stone looked, for the first time in their interview, diffident of his own powers. He scratched his head, as if puzzled, and finally said, apologetically:

"I ain't an eddicated man, sir, and you are. Will you tell me what's the meaning of them words?"

"What words?"

"About bein' leveled to a quality of woa."

Dulcie smiled.

I mean that in this prison, where all are equally miserable, there is no excuse for pride in any prisoner."

"That's jest what I say," exclaimed Stone. "And now let me tell you what that Conrad said to me the other day. He was in the loadin' gang, haulin' stone for the new dock; and he'd been workin' as much as any two men, so I says to him: 'Conrad, there ain't no call for one prisoner to kill himself while the rest loaf. You jest let the others do somethin', says I. I meant it kind; for I seen he were a-shieldin' a lazy cuss called Simpson, as were allers shammin' sick. And what d'yer think that Conrad said?"

"I don't know. Thanked you, I suppose."

"Not he. He ain't that kind of a hairpin. Says he to me, with a kind of a grin that made me mad: 'Warden,' says he; 'where equality of woe exists, with inequality of resisting power, it is meet that the higher organization should assist the lower to bear the ills of fortune.' Them was the very words, for I made him say them all over three times, so I could repeat 'em to the old man."

"You mean the governor of the prison?"

"Yes. I mistrusted Conrad was givin' me lip of some sort, and I had him up for it, so's I might git a chance to paddle him and break his sperrit. You're never safe with these felers, till you git 'em broke."

"Well, and what did the governor say?"

"He on'y larfed and told me to leave that Conrad alone. I s'pose it's because he's a high-toned cuss, and the old man thinks he'll be pardoned out some of these days. I say, treat 'em all alike. I've b'en a-layin' fur that Conrad ever since."

The mechanical rigor of the officer of the law had disappeared from Stone as he talked over this, his pet grievance; and he looked what

he was, the coarse brute, chafing under the sense of a convict's mental superiority, and not knowing how to resent it, by any but physical means, when an opportunity should come.

The visitor saw this, and observed hastily:

"But the poor fellow did not mean to insult you. All he said was, in plain English, that he, being stronger than the rest, ought to help them do their work. It was really a noble sentiment, and it increases my interest in this unfortunate young man."

Stone looked at him with a sneer, only thinly veiled by the respect he showed to a man committed to his charge by his chief.

"He's a murderer," he retorted, sullenly. "He ain't got no right to put on airs. He meant that for lip to me, and I'll break him down yet. See if I don't."

Mr. Dulcie shrugged his shoulders and walked on toward the office. Presently he asked:

"How long has this Conrad been here?"

"Seven years," was the reply.

The visitor sighed.

"Poor fellow! He must have been a mere boy when he entered."

"He was eighteen, and jest outer college," retorted Stone. "Well, sir, here we are at the office. Good-mornin'. I've got to go down to the dock and relieve my mate with the loadin' gang. Thank ye, sir. Good-day."

His last words were accompanied by the politest smile of which his iron features were capable, as he slipped something into his pocket, after shaking hands with the visitor; and Mr. Dulcie turned into the prison office, where the head clerk asked him whether he had enjoyed his visit.

Dulcie shook his head.

"I cannot say 'enjoyed.' It was a painful visit, but very interesting. By-the-by, can you tell me anything about a prisoner they call Conrad?—a tall, handsome fellow, who works in the loading gang at the dock, as the warden told me."

"Certainly, sir. He's one of the show cases."

"Show cases?"

"I mean the remarkable ones, that every visitor asks about. Do you remember the Vargrave murder, seven years ago, where Mr. Conrad Vargrave was found dead with a bullet in his brain."

"Yes, I remember. They tried some young man called—what was it?"

"Burton, Conrad Burton, his grandson, named after him. It was an interesting case, on account of the difficulty of tracing home the crime. The evidence was circumstantial, but crushing."

"I forget the details."

"Oh, they were not much. There was no external marks on the body, but the mouth was full of blood, that had dried when the body was found, and a twenty-two caliber bullet was in the brain, evidently fired through the mouth. The grandson, Conrad, was found to have in his pocket a pistol with one empty cartridge of the same caliber, and his footsteps were traced to and from the arbor where the old gentleman was found dead. He was even seen running from the place after the shot had been fired, and told a boatman whom he met that he had fired at a squirrel for fun. Oh, it was a clear case. He couldn't get over the evidence, and the district attorney laid himself out on the trial like a good one."

"Was Conrad well defended?"

"He had the best men in the country on his side, and they fought hard; but salt couldn't save him. The best they could do was to get the governor to commute the penalty to imprisonment for life."

Dulcie had listened attentively, with a face that indicated deep thought.

"Did they assign any motive for the murder on the trial?" he asked in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, that was what settled his case. The motive was transparent. You see he wasn't the next heir by a good deal. He was the son of a daughter of Vargrave, who ran away with a play actor and was disowned by the old gentleman. There was another child, Burton, born of old Vargrave's second marriage. He was the heir, and it was brought out on the trial that it was this second marriage stepmother business that drove Mrs. Burton from home. Anyway young Vargrave—Speaker Vargrave was his name—was only two years older than his nephew, Conrad Burton, and the next heir by right, at the time of the murder."

"Well, what had that to do with it?" asked the young man, puzzled.

"Wait a bit, and you'll see. I've got the whole case down in my scrap-book; for I take a great interest in these things. You see, Mrs. Burton didn't live long with her play actor. He died, out West, killed in a railroad collision, and his wife was all smashed up too. They saved the baby between them, and Judge Vargrave relented when he was telegraphed for and found his daughter dying. He took the baby, anyway, and brought it up well."

"That was this Conrad?"

"Yes. He was a fine boy, the witnesses said—took after his father, who was the handsomest

man on the stage in his day—and very quick to learn. He got to be quite a favorite with the old gentleman; while Spencer Vargrave was a wild dissipated fellow. Anyway, after the funeral was over, before any suspicion pointed to him, he brought it on himself, by producing from his pocket a will, drawn and signed by the old man, disinheriting Spencer Vargrave, and leaving all the money to Conrad Burton."

"From his pocket? That was singular."

"So Spencer thought, and it was he that finally hunted up the evidence and put his nephew into the felon's dock."

"What good would that do him?"

"Simply that if Burton were hung or a life convict, the property would revert to his next heir, and that heir was Spencer Vargrave, if indeed the will were admitted to be valid. But the surrogate set it aside."

Mr. Dulcie looked thoughtfully at the clerk.

"I see," he said, "the evidence was strong. But why could not Spencer Vargrave himself have done the deed, for revenge at being cut off from his inheritance?"

The clerk smiled pityingly.

"Why, bless your soul, sir, Spencer Vargrave was in the middle of the Atlantic ocean at the time— Hallo! what's that?"

The sharp crack of a rifle sounded outside.

CHAPTER II.

THE MUTINY.

THE visitor looked mechanically out of the office window at the sound of the shot toward the dock, which was in plain view therefrom, and saw a crowd of men in the striped prison dress running to a single point near the end of the dock.

To his surprise, the urbane clerk, who had been entertaining him thus far, jumped off his high stool, whipped a pair of huge revolvers out of the desk before him, and ran out of the office door toward the dock, while Mr. Dulcie could see at least a dozen more men, carrying rifles and revolvers, running down toward the same place from the prison or its vicinity.

What had happened?

At first he was bewildered; but a moment later, when a fierce struggle began, he understood it all.

Forty or fifty men, in gray and brown striped dresses, were fighting against twelve or thirteen in blue flannel uniform.

But the men in blue were armed to the teeth; the men in stripes had nothing but nature's weapons and pieces of rock.

It was a mutiny among the convicts, and every official of the prison who was at hand had hurried to put it down before it assumed more formidable proportions.

Maurice Dulcie, left alone in the office, trembled with excitement.

To one of his quiet habits and peaceful literary life, there was something very terrible in this sudden and desperate conflict of infuriated men.

The window was open and he could see and hear everything distinctly, the savage and brutal oaths of the convicts, as they swayed to and fro in a dense body on the dock, threatening their opponents if they approached them, and making good their threats with showers of jagged stones, that they hurled at the men in blue, who had retreated out of range and seemed to be meditating a stratagem.

Out on the dock, behind the convicts, he saw three prostrate forms, one in blue, two in stripes; and shuddered as he recognized that they were dead bodies.

An irresistible impulse of curiosity drew him outside, just as a lull took place in the conflict, and both parties stood glaring at each other.

Then a sharp clear voice from the men in blue cut the air like a knife.

"Men, don't be foolish. You haven't a chance. Give up quietly, or we shall have to fire on you."

"Fire away and—"

A string of profane obscenity followed from the convicts; but it died away, and one might see they were wavering.

"Give up quietly, or it will be the worse for you," cried the sharp voice, and the governor of the prison, Colonel Orville Keene, stepped forward.

"I don't want to order a volley unless you force me to it; but your lives are in our hands, and you know it."

"As lieve be shot now as paddled to death," cried one of the convicts, desperately. "Let's charge 'em, mates, and die game."

He was a Hercules of a fellow, with a savage face, and he ran out of the ranks with a stone in his hand as he spoke.

"Crack! Thud!"

Maurice Dulcie clasped his hands with a cry of horror.

In one instant that grand figure of a man, with all his marvelous physical development, had dropped powerless like a log of wood—stone dead—and lay still on the ground, while the governor's voice was heard, sharper and more menacing:

"You see what he has got for his pains. Drop those stones! Quick!"

As he spoke he walked straight toward the

lowering convicts with his forefinger extended commandingly, and the journalist noticed that he had not even a pistol about his person.

And then, to the amazement of Dulcie, who had not yet fathomed the secret of moral power, the savage-looking criminals dropped their missiles and stood still, while the governor continued, sharply:

"Get into line here. Warden Brown, take charge of this gang, and march the men to their cells. I will investigate this matter myself, and if it was Stone's fault, no one shall suffer injustice. You know me, men, and I never break my word. Forward, march!"

The young journalist stood dumb with wonder. What a dozen men in arms had failed to do, a single resolute will had accomplished, by adroitly seizing an opportunity.

The lately desperate and defiant crowd of convicts had subsided into a stolid, silent file of shaven faces and slouching striped bodies, moving by with the mechanical regularity of the lock-step, headed by a single warden, till the last man had disappeared in the prison; when Dulcie heard a voice at his elbow, saying:

"By Jove, that was the closest shave I've seen for a long time. Visitors don't often have such a chance as that."

Dulcie looked round at the clerk, who was dangling a pair of revolvers in his hands and looking much relieved.

"I should hope not," he answered, with a shudder. "Do you know that four men are lying dead, here?"

The clerk looked composedly toward the dock as he answered:

"Yes, I see, and were pretty cheaply let off at that. I remember, in the last mutiny, ten years ago, they killed five wardens and eleven convicts, before it was quelled."

"And what caused the mutiny?"

"It was in Governor Acton's time, before the old man came here. Things were all at sixes and sevens. Knock down and drag out, you know. Quite different now. Old man's a trump at prison management. Shall we go down and see the bodies? I'm a little curious to find where this row began. Come with the old man."

It was probably a mixture of feelings that induced the young man to accept the offer. He had never seen a man shot, and his experience of criminals had been of the slightest. There was a strange fascination that seemed to be drawing him on to view the slain, and yet behind that again was another, a sentiment of anxiety for which he could not account, to find whether, among the dead bodies, were that of the handsome young convict he had noticed on the way to the dock, and whose history he had just heard when the fracas occurred.

In the file of men that went back to the prison, he had failed to recognize the face and figure of Conrad the convict.

Was the ill-starred youth dead?

He followed the governor as he went down to the dock, and they paused at the body of the herculean convict, whose death had checked the mutiny.

It lay on its side, collapsed and limp, like one sleeping, a small blue hole in the forehead, a dark pool under the back of the head, showing the manner of death.

"Who fired that shot?" asked the governor, as he looked at the body with the thoughtful frown of a preoccupied man.

"Warden Jackson, sir," answered one of the men behind him.

"No, I didn't," replied the man indicated, in a tone as if he regretted to make the admission. "It was a mighty pretty shot; but I never fired it."

"Who did then?" asked the governor, looking around at them all.

"I think I may claim that credit," interposed the urbane clerk of the prison, smiling. "I saw it was time for something to be done, governor, and I don't believe in misses."

The governor looked at him steadily.

"You did your duty, Mr. Mathews," he said, coldly. "There is no doubt that a jury will acquit you. At the same time, I could have quelled that mutiny without another death, though possibly at more risk."

He walked on to the dock, and Dulcie went after him, while Mathews in dungeon walked back to his office.

As for the visitor, he felt at that moment as if the clerk were a murderer, as vile as any to be found in the State.

On the half-finished dock, among the broken blocks of granite, lay the body of Warden Stone, cut, gashed and disfigured, in a manner that showed he must have been killed with jagged pieces of rock, and beside him, shot, one through the heart, the other just above the right ear, lay two convicts, one a thin, puny creature, the other a broad-shouldered, powerful man, who had died with a savage frown on his face.

The Winchester rifle of the dead warden lay at a little distance away, the stock in splinters, the barrel bent like a bow.

The governor looked at Stone, and then turned to Dulcie, whom he recognized with a grave nod of his head.

"I was afraid that man would come to this end at last," he said in a low tone. "He was one of Acton's old wardens, whose only notion of discipline was the knock down and drag out system. It works well, till it meets with the wrong subject. Stone has been tyrannizing over some one, I don't know whom; but I intend to find out, before I sleep. Jackson, go to the prison and send out Conrad. He belonged to this gang, and he can give an intelligent account possibly, of this trouble."

Jackson touched his hat.

"Please, sir, Conrad isn't in the prison."

The governor started.

"Not in the prison! How do you know?"

"He wasn't in the gang as they marched in, sir. I noticed it particular, and thought he was killed on the dock. Stone had a great spite against him, sir, and I mistrusted that was the trouble the minute I heard the shot."

In a moment the governor was all alert and full of activity.

"Then he has run away in the confusion. Order the bell rung at once; tell Mathews to telegraph his description everywhere. Quick! Be off, all of you."

The wardens dispersed on the run, and the governor said hurriedly to Dulcie:

"My dear sir, I'm sorry to be able to show you so little attention to-day; but duty must be attended to, you know, and I am responsible for all the prisoners."

"Do as you please, by all means," responded Dulcie. "Don't let me be in the way. I'll go, if you like, at once."

"It is not necessary. It may interest you to see what we do in a case of this kind. If you will keep by me, you shall see all."

The clang of the large bell came down from the gray walls of the prison, and files of striped figures, at the lock-step, moved in from all quarters, as the governor and the visitor went into the office, and thence, through the iron door, into the inner court of the prison, with its tiers on tiers of iron galleries and grated doors.

They could hear the monotonous voices of the wardens calling the rolls all over the prison, and after awhile the head warden came up and reported:

"All present, sir, but Burton, Antonio Natali, and the men who were killed."

The governor looked surprised.

"Natali! What, the new man that was sent in last week. How came he out in the loading gang?"

"He wasn't, sir. He was in the shoe shop."

"Then how did he get out?"

"No one knows, sir. He's gone. That's all."

The governor frowned deeply. The day's work was a deep stain on his record for ability. Three men killed, two more missing, and no one knew anything about it all. Colonel Keene looked as angry as he felt.

"Was any warden besides Stone on the dock when the trouble began?" he asked.

"Robins was, sir; but he lost his nerve and ran away, no one knows where. He's in now."

"Send for him."

A few minutes after, a stout man, looking as if he were much agitated, touched his cap to the governor and said:

"You wanted me, sir?"

"Yes, Robins. Were you on the dock when this trouble began?"

"Yes, sir."

The man moved his lips as if they were dry, and he wanted to moisten them. His eyes sought the floor, and then glanced up at the governor's face, with a nervous, apprehensive expression.

Dulcie watched him curiously. It was a new experience of human nature, in a field of which he as yet knew nothing. The man's face was that of a resolute fighter, yet now he was frightened out of his wits, before a quiet looking gentleman, whose only point of remark was a keen gray eye.

"How did this trouble commence, Robins? Did you see it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me all you know."

Robins moistened his lips again.

"The gang was putting down broken stone into the crib, sir, and Warden Stone was bossing the job, and swearing at the man, Simpson, for not lifting enough. I didn't pay no heed to 'em, for I always thought Simpson a fraud, till, all at once, I heard Stone cry out: 'You will, will you.' I looked round, and I seen Simpson with a sharp rock, heaving it at the warden, and Stone ups with his rifle and shoots him dead. Then Briggs, the other one as was killed, rushed at him and sent a rock into the warden's face. How the rest happened I do not know, sir. I heard another shot; saw Briggs and the warden go down; and then all the men piled on with rocks and stones, and had me cut off at the end of the dock."

"Well, what did you do?" asked the governor, as the warden hesitated.

"I didn't know what to do, sir. I was all alone, and a lot of 'em rushed at me in a body, with stones. I seen there was no chance for me; so I jumped off the dock and hid under it till the row was over."

Conrad, the Convict.

"Did you see anything of Conrad, the man who has escaped?" asked the governor.

Robins drew a deep breath.

"No, sir. The Lord's my witness I didn't see him or hair of him after the fight."

The governor nodded.

"That will do. Go back to your post."

With a sigh of relief, Robins went off to his post, and the governor beckoned to Mr. Dulcie to come to one side.

"What do you think of that man's story?" he asked in a low tone.

Dulcie hesitated.

"I hardly think he tells the whole truth."

"You're right. He knows what's become of Conrad, and he dare not tell."

"Why dare not?"

"He's afraid of the convicts."

"Afraid! But I thought—"

"Of course, you thought they were in perfect discipline. They are, up to a certain point; but where fifty men have to control twelve hundred against their will, there arise certain unwritten customs, stronger than laws; and woe to the man that breaks them. Robins has had to buy his life from the convicts, and Conrad's escape is the price he has paid."

"And what are you going to do about it?" asked Dulcie curiously.

The governor set his firm lips a little firmer, as he replied;

"I am going to find out where those two men have gone. Come with me down to the dock and we will investigate."

Without a word the young journalist followed the other out of the prison, down to the half-finished dock by the river side. The tide was down; and the open work of the dock, not yet filled with stone, stretched out into the river like a gray skeleton, the piles rising out of a waste of brown mud.

The governor pointed to a line of tracks that came up to the shore from a hollow place under the dock, which was there planked over above, and remarked:

"That part of Robins's story was true. He did jump over. But if so, he must have been seen by them, and Conrad must have escaped by way of the river. I am going to search that place."

And the neatly dressed official deliberately waded into the mud, half-way to his knees, following the tracks to the place he had indicated.

Dulcie, without the same motive for investigation, remained on shore and saw the governor of the prison disappear under the dock.

Several minutes passed without any sign of his return, when Dulcie heard his voice and beheld him coming in round the other side of the dock having passed all the way through followed by two of the wardens, carrying in their hands the striped-suits of convicts.

"You see," observed the governor calmly. "I knew Robins was lying. Here are the clothes of two convicts; but the men themselves escaped in the confusion, stole a boat, and are on the river somewhere. I am going to follow them in the prison tug. 'Will you come with me? It will give you a good story for your paper. I'll have those two before night, or my name is not Keene."

"I will go with you," answered the visitor; but in his heart he could not help wishing that the convict might escape his pursuers.

CHAPTER III. ON THE RIVER.

THE day was fine and warm, with a faint breeze down the river, when the little tug dashed out into the stream, with a group of men in blue clothes gathered on the bow, and began a systematic search of every schooner, sloop and tow in sight.

"We will go down the river first," said Keene. "An escaped convict is nearly sure to make for the city to hide himself."

"Why?" asked Dulcie.

"It is an instinct with them, and one that has much to recommend it. If they went up the river into the country, they would surely be noticed as strangers; but in the metropolis every one is lost."

As he spoke, they ran up alongside of a slow-moving sloop, loaded down to the water's edge, with a deck load of bricks. A man was steering her, another sat on the bowsprit, gazing idly at the water, and both looked askance at the tug as she passed, as if they knew and disliked her.

"Seen any boats from the prison dock, cap?" called out one of the wardens as they passed.

The man at the helm shook his head.

"No, I hain't. Lost anybody?"

The warden deigned no answer, and the tug rushed on after a schooner full of lumber from up the river.

Dulcie, who felt a strange interest in the chase, though not of the kind, perhaps, that Colonel Keene would have wished him to entertain, noticed that the governor allowed his subordinates to do all the talking to the vessels as they passed them, while he himself retired to the pilot-house and kept sweeping the river with a glass. Perhaps this was the reason why the young man at last climbed up to the same place

and took a seat by the colonel, who retained in his manner all the nervous activity of his old army life.

On went the tug down the river, passing sloops, schooners and barges, the crew giving some a mere passing glance, holding conversation with others, till Colonel Keene at last said to the pilot:

"Head her round and go up again. We're all wrong."

The man, used to unreasoning obedience, altered the course of the little vessel, and they passed up the river again till they came in sight of a huge tow, composed of some twenty or thirty canal boats and a raft of timber, the whole employing the services of three large tugs.

Somewhat to Dulcie's surprise, the prison-boat was headed straight for this tow, and Colonel Keene laid down his glass, went down on deck, ordered a plank out, and boarded the tow while his boat ran alongside.

The wardens remained behind, and Dulcie followed their example, watching with much interest the movements of the alert figure of the governor, as he stepped about from barge to barge of the tow, speaking to the captains of the different boats.

Presently they saw him coming back, and he jumped aboard the prison tug and called out:

"Up the river again, full speed. We'll get them at the Highlands."

Round went the tug, and the little engine puffed louder than ever as the screw churned the water, and they swept up the river at full speed.

Colonel Keene resumed his seat behind the pilot-house, and took up his glass once more, while Dulcie felt his heart beating a little faster, as he asked:

"Did you find anything, colonel?"

Keene nodded, but made no answer till he had examined several passing sails, when he said in his quick way:

"Yes, I guess I've got 'em. They went up, instead of down."

"How do you know that?"

"Simple enough. They can't fly, and they didn't swim, or we should have seen them. They changed their clothes under that dock, and stole a boat, the only one in the place that was missing. That mutiny offered them the opportunity, and they were not noticed in the confusion."

"But the townspeople must have seen them."

"The townspeople? Don't you know that the average townsman sympathizes with the convict, till he has had experience of him in the burglar business? If they were seen, no one is going to give them away."

"But what did you hear on the tow?"

"That they passed the boat, or the boat passed them, a mile above Sing-Sing, going up the river, rowed by two men in blue shirts and trowsers. The description fitted exactly."

"But what are they going to do?" asked the young journalist, as the vessel glided on.

Keene shrugged his shoulders.

"What would you do if you were a convict, trying to escape?"

"I don't know, except try to hide, perhaps."

"That's just what they'll do," answered the governor. "Aha! Here comes the Albany day boat. She's a little late."

They could hear the distant throbbing rumble of the paddles, and see the white pyramid with its black funnels, far away up the river, as the huge steamer came on.

When two swift vessels approach each other, it does not take long for them to meet on the Hudson river, and in less than ten minutes the little tug was almost under the bows of the huge Leviathan that was rushing down the stream at full speed.

They were nearing her rapidly when Keene uttered an exclamation and started up, gazing intently at the steamer.

They were about passing on the port side of the large vessel, when from behind a schooner that was slowly dragging its way up the river, with a deck load of timber, darted a small boat, with two men in it, pulling directly under the bows of the prison tug and between her and the huge "St. John."

The position of the three vessels was of that peculiar character which only lasts for a moment or two, the tug crossing the steamer's bows diagonally, with just room to shave by, the day boat giving a sheer to starboard to assist her, the schooner plodding slowly along, expecting the others to keep clear of her.

And just then, right across the bow of the tug, dashed the small boat, two men in it dragging like madmen at the oars, and trying to cross the course of the rushing day boat.

The position of the tug was so critical at the time, that the greater peril of the boat was hardly noticed.

Only Colonel Keene and Dulcie saw it; saw the towering bow of the steamer bear down on it; saw it strike the little craft amidships, and saw boat and men disappear.

The next moment the huge vessel rushed by them, with a thunder of paddles, the people on board crowding eagerly to the side to see how close the tug would come.

It was a very narrow escape at best; for the attraction of the huge hull of the steamer and the suction of the water were equally hard to resist.

The spray from the St. John's paddles came on the tug's deck, and a rope could have been thrown from one vessel to the other with ease at any time till they had passed; but the danger only lasted a few seconds, and there was the tug rocking on the swell of the huge steamer, while Keene cried:

"Stop her! Back her! If they're not drowned, we've got them at last!"

The bell clanged twice to reverse the engine, and the screw churned the water in the wake of the day boat, while all the crew of the tug looked eagerly into the river for traces of the lost boat.

"There she comes!" cried one of the men, as a dark object bobbed up about a hundred yards ahead, in the white wake of the steamer.

Round went the tug, and steamed up to the dark object.

As they had expected, it was the remains of the boat, cut nearly in half by the sharp bow of the steamer, but empty and bottom up.

Then, one after another the oars floated up in the white wake, and one or two stretchers and loose boards.

"But the men are drowned," observed Maurice Dulcie, sadly. "Poor fellows. I wonder who they were?"

The governor looked at him sharply.

"They were our men, of course. You don't suppose any sane man, not desperate, would have taken such a risk when there was no necessity?"

Dulcie looked surprised.

"You don't mean the escaped convicts?"

"Of course, I do. They were hiding behind the schooner and saw us coming. They knew the boat well enough, and that we should be sure to search the schooner as soon as the big boat had passed. They had some wild notion, I suppose, of getting to the other side of the St. John and catching a rope for a tow, or else of escaping notice in the confusion. At all events they've met their deserts. Yes, they're drowned, probably knocked on the head by the paddles, and their bodies won't come up for a day or two, when some one will find them floating. We'll head back to Sing-Sing."

They steamed slowly back in the direction of Sing-Sing, the men on the tug closely scanning the water all the way for signs of anything floating, and Dulcie took leave of Colonel Keene at the wharf with a heavy heart.

"A strange day!" he said to himself meditatively, as he sat in the cars speeding homeward. "Within a few hours I have seen six men come to violent deaths, and yet I feel for only one of them any compunction. Poor Conrad! He was such a fine-looking fellow. To think that such a face and figure should be those of a murderer and a convict sentenced for life."

The melancholy feeling remained with him when he had reached the city, and till he had worn it off in the busy round of his duties as assistant editor of a weekly journal, where he did two men's work at a low salary.

It followed him into his work, keeping ahead of the remorseless foreman of the printing room, demanding copy, and it crossed him again two days after, as he read in one of the exchanges among the news items the following:

"THE WAGES OF SIN."

"The body of one of the convicts, drowned in attempting to escape from Sing-Sing prison, as we mentioned in our last issue, was found floating in the river opposite Tarrytown, yesterday noon. It was so much injured by the fishes as to be totally unrecognizable, save by the clothing. The prison guards are dragging the river for the other body, which is expected hourly to float up. Colonel Keene, the efficient superintendent of the prison, thinks that the example will have a wholesome effect on the rest of the prisoners. Robins, the warden accused of conniving at the escape, has been dismissed from the position he held, and will probably be indicted for the offense. Pending investigation he has been put under a thousand dollars bail."

Maurice Dulcie laid down the paper and mused:

"Only one body found; yet two prisoners escaped. I wonder which of the two it was? I believe I'll write to Colonel Keene."

He watched the papers for several days, but found nothing more on the subject, and at last wrote to his friend, the governor, who returned him the following reply a few days later:

"MY DEAR DULCIE: The body that was found was probably that of the Italian, Natali, as it was not large enough for that of Conrad. We found out that Natali, who was a new arrival, had had his friends come up when he was brought to the prison and hide the clothes where the others were found. Robins had been bribed by some parties outside in the interest of Natali, who was an old bank burglar, with a rich gang behind him—in fact, an aristocrat among criminals. It was Robins who smuggled Natali out under the dock when he ought to have been in the shoe shop; and the two, Conrad and Natali, must have been in that hole when Robins jumped down during the fight. There are still some things I don't understand about it, and probably never shall now, because the only people who could have explained are dead. I mean Conrad and Natali. The body of Conrad will probably never be found now,

as the river has been full of sharks of late, coming up on the flood tide. I am rather sorry for the poor fellow, for I began to take quite an interest in him on account of his superior education and refinement, compared with the rest; but I suspect it was all for the best, as the crime for which he was suffering was one of peculiar atrocity. He had fine talents, but he used them vilely. One comfort, he can never disgrace his family any more.

"Come and see me when you can, and believe me,
"Yours sincerely, ORVILLE KEENE."

Dulcie laid down the letter.

"How shallow the sharpest men may be," he mused. "He settles the eternal destiny of a fellow-creature as if it were a certainty, when he is not even certain that the man is dead. I don't know how it is, but I cannot believe Conrad was drowned. I wish I had time to investigate—"

He was interrupted by the entrance of the foreman, with his usual demand for "copy"—this time only five columns—and from that time the memory of his short trip up the river seemed to be driven from his mind by work. In fact, it was furthest from his thoughts that he would ever see or hear anything more of the matter, and he had almost forgotten it, when, that very evening, as he went to his boarding house, he received two letters, which were to make a great change in his life.

One of these informed him that a rich uncle, who had shown him some kindness as a boy, but whom he had not seen for some years, had just died, leaving the poor newspaper hack a fortune which seemed to him princely.

The other was in a lady's hand, and ran as follows:

"If Mr. Maurice Dulcie will call at No. 238 West street this evening, he will confer a great favor on

BEATRICE BENTON."

"Beatrice Benton!" he ejaculated, knowing her by reputation as a celebrated actress. "What can she want with me? We don't do any theatrical news. She must have made some mistake in the name. Hello! here's a postscript. That'll tell what she really means."

The postscript was shorter than the note, short as that was:

"P. S.—My business is strictly private."

"It is not theatrical business," he thought; "and anyway, if it were, I need not slave about it any more now. To think that I can throw up my place on the *Boot and Shoe Journal* and never be bothered with foremen asking for copy again! It seems almost too good to be true, if the lawyer's letter were not so very explicit. But here it is, in black and white: 'By the terms of the will the executors are directed to pay over to you, in United States bonds, the sum of a hundred thousand dollars, and we are happy to state that the July coupons are now due, so that you can touch a thousand dollars in cash at once.' Isn't that grand! No more pinching and scraping! No more slavery and fifteen dollars a week. I am free at last to go where I will, and—"

He took up his hat.

"The first place I shall go to is to No. 238 West—street, to see what Miss Benton wants with me."

CHAPTER IV. THE ACTRESS.

THE door of No. 238 West—street belonged to a house where furnished apartments were to be hired at extravagant prices, on account of the selectness of the neighborhood; and the door was opened to Maurice Dulcie by a stout person in solemn black, whose face looked familiar to the young man.

"Is Miss Benton in?" asked the visitor.

The man in black bowed silently and dropped his eyes on the floor, an action that set Maurice to wondering where he had seen him before.

Then he shut the door and said, softly:

"This way, sir."

The visitor followed the solemn man and scanned his figure narrowly; but without recognizing it.

It was that of a rather short, but very heavy-built man, with broad shoulders and a look of great strength about him, set off by the tight black-dress coat of a man servant in high life.

He tapped deferentially at the door of a room on the next floor, and a clear sweet voice bidding him enter, he ushered Maurice into a long, handsome parlor, rather too full of furniture, and announced:

"Mr. Dulcie, ma'am."

Maurice thought to himself:

"How the deuce did he know my name? I never told him."

But he forgot all about it in another moment, as a lady, of such singular grace and elegance as he had never seen, rose from a sofa and advanced toward him, saying:

"This is indeed kind, Mr. Dulcie. I hardly dared to hope you would come."

Maurice bowed, somewhat embarrassed by the beauty and ease of the lady.

He was a young man of shy and retiring habit, and this lady was a total stranger to him, and exceedingly handsome.

No wonder he blushed and felt as if he hardly knew what to say.

He stammered out something about "always

liking to oblige ladies," but she saved him the trouble of an answer by going on:

"I suppose you were very much surprised at receiving a note from me, especially one asking you to come in the evening, when I am usually playing; but the fact is I am very ill to-night, too ill to play, and I told the manager he must put on the other piece."

Maurice Dulcie looked surprised, as well he might, for the lady was the picture of health; but she went on as fluently as ever:

"At least I made him think so, thanks to a doctor's certificate, and I shall not be liable to disturbance to-night. So if you will just come and sit down by me on this sofa, I will tell you all about it. Don't say that I weary you with my chatter, because I assure you that I have something very important to tell you."

Maurice looked at the tall, willowy figure, the wavy blonde hair and large gray eyes, and thought to himself that he could listen all night if she chose to talk so long; but felt too much overawed to say so.

The lady stood watching him under the full glare of the gaslight; read him as easily as a book—for she was a mistress of the art of fascination—and motioned him to a soft downy sofa, where he sunk among the pillows. She took her seat so as to watch him as closely as ever, while she continued:

"And have you not the least idea of why I sent for you?"

"I supposed it to be a mistake at first," he admitted. "I thought you took me for my cousin, Raymond Dulcie, who is on the *Libretto*, and wanted to be interviewed. But my paper does no theatrical news."

She smiled slightly.

"And you thought I wanted to be interviewed about losing diamonds or something of sort, did you? But you did not read my postscript, surely, or—"

"Oh, yes, and that undeceived me."

"I meant it to do so."

Her manner changed to one of great gravity, and an anxious look came into her eyes.

The woman of the world actually began to look afraid of the shy boy.

"I want to ask you a few questions," she said. "Will you promise me to answer them all?"

"Anything in the world," he answered eagerly. "It will be an honor, a pleasure to be questioned by you, Miss Burton. Even to be in the same room with you makes—makes my head swim."

He stammered as he said it and she smiled again, her sweet, dangerous smile, for which men had killed each other ere that.

"I thank you, and I believe you are sincere. Now for my questions. Were you ever at Sing-Sing prison?"

Maurice could not help smiling.

"Certainly. Only a few days ago."

"Why did you go there?"

"I went on duty for my paper."

"But what can a paper like yours, the—the what is its name?"

"The *Boot and Shoe Journal*."

"Yes. What has a paper of that sort to do with State's Prison management?"

"Well, you see they make a good many boots and shoes at Sing-Sing, and there is a good deal of jealousy about convict labor, so I was sent to gather the facts about it. But why do you ask all this, Miss Burton?"

"You are not to ask questions, but to answer them, Mr. Dulcie. I have my reasons for asking."

"I beg your pardon. Go on."

"You were there when that terrible mutiny occurred?"

"I was. I saw it all."

The lady shuddered.

"It must have been horrible."

"It was. Inside of two minutes, four men were killed. Three were convicts, one was a warden."

"This warden—he was a very brutal, ignorant man, was he not?"

Maurice Dulcie looked surprised.

"He was; but how did you know—?"

"You are to answer questions, not to ask them, sir. You newspaper men are so used to interviewing that you cannot submit to be interviewed."

"Again I beg pardon. Go on."

"Two of the poor prisoners escaped in the confusion, did they not?"

"Two of the convicts got away in a boat, but were afterward drowned in the river, trying to cross the bows of the Albany day boat, to escape the prison tug."

"Yes; that is what I want to know about. Were you on board that tug?"

"I was."

"And you saw the two poor fellows go under; did you not?"

"I saw their boat cut in half, and I understand the body of one of them was found yesterday."

The lady leaned forward and laid her hand on his arm with a look of great interest.

"The body of one? Can you tell me the names of both, and which was found? That is the question I wanted to ask you."

Dulcie considered a moment. He had been

so busy with other things that he had almost forgotten the names.

"Let me see," he said. "One of them was an Italian called Natali—"

"Antonio Natali?" asked the lady eagerly.

"Yes; that was it. The other was one of the handsomest men I ever saw, even in his striped convict dress, and his name was Conrad Burton."

He looked at Beatrice and saw that she was very pale as she murmured:

"It must be true. It is all over."

Maurice hesitated and watched her.

"You knew the poor fellow," he said presently, "and are interested in his fate; is it not so?"

"Interested!" she echoed in a dreary tone. "It has been my dream for seven long years to see him again and tell him that the time was coming when I could clear his name from the stain put on it by another. Ah, Mr. Dulcie, you have a good heart, you can feel for us. Seven years is a long time to wait for justice, and to find the cup dashed from your lips, just as you are ready to taste it."

She seemed to have almost forgotten he was in the room as she spoke, in the deep rich tones which had so often moved audiences to tears, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"But if, as I apprehend," began Maurice, "you have secured any evidence tending to relieve Conrad Burton from the stain of a crime I could not believe he had committed, it is not too late, even now, to clear his memory. Was that what you meant?"

Miss Burton turned toward him, with a sudden swift vehemence that she knew well how to use on occasion.

"You do not believe he committed it?" she asked, earnestly. "Do you say that; you, who only met him once? How then must I feel who—but never mind; it is all over. He is dead, and all my work is useless."

"I do not know if he be dead or not," the young man answered, slowly. "Of course I have no facts on which to base my opinion, but I cannot help saying to you that I do not believe Conrad Burton is dead at all. I think he is alive and in hiding."

The lady looked at him sharply.

"What makes you say that? Is it only to please me?"

"Not entirely. I don't believe that he is dead. You see I was on the tug and saw the whole affair. I will tell you about it, if you don't think it will distress you."

She leaned toward him eagerly.

"On the contrary, I am all attention. Tell me all that you saw. If there be a thread on which I can hang a hope let me see it."

"Very well, I will tell you all I know. We were not a hundred yards from the St. John when I saw the boat trying to cut in between us two. She escaped our bow and had nearly shaved past the St. John's cutwater when it struck her. There were two men in the boat, and I saw the forward man rise up and dive overboard as the bow of the St. John struck them. The other man sat still and I saw him thrown out."

"Well," asked the lady, breathlessly, "and what do you infer from that?"

"That the man who dived was a clear, cool-headed athlete, who did so to escape the paddles of the steamer, while the other man was demoralized at the critical moment and killed."

The actress clasped her hands.

"Oh, if you could only prove that he escaped! If it were only possible! I would—I would—"

She turned to him with one of her witching looks and said impulsively:

"Oh, Mr. Dulcie, you would be the dearest friend I ever had, if you could do that."

Maurice turned red and pale under her glance, and the words seemed to crowd to his lips faster than he could utter them.

"Oh, Miss Benton, I would do anything for you in the wide world. But it is not so difficult for him to have escaped as you think. You see, he had been hiding behind a schooner when we came up, and the vessel was still there when he dived. After the boat went down and we scraped past the St. John, all the prison-guards were busy searching the wake of the steamer. No one looked at the schooner after that; and I am convinced that it was quite possible for a man to have swum to her without being noticed, when all eyes were turned in other directions."

Beatrice Burton's eyes sparkled.

"God bless you! And he was a grand swimmer. I have known him to swim ever so far under the water. But—"

Her countenance fell again.

"Would not the people of the schooner have betrayed him?"

"I think not. The river-men sympathize with escaping prisoners, I am told; and then they had no means of knowing him to be a prisoner at all, for his clothes were blue."

"And you really think he may have escaped and be in hiding somewhere?"

"I really do. If I could only find that schooner, I would make sure of it."

She made an imperious gesture of dissent,

"On no account. If he be alive, he will come to me, all in good time. I am content to trust him. If he only knew—"

She paused and appeared to be musing deeply, while Maurice Dulcie, more disturbed than he had thought possible when he entered the house, sat watching her furtively.

Who was this woman, and what was her connection with the convict, Conrad?

Presently the lady turned to him again with one of her sweetly fascinating smiles.

"I am afraid I have bored you greatly with my questions, and you must wonder why I sent for you."

"I confess you have made me curious, and very much interested. I wish I could help you in your enterprise, whatever it is."

"You can if you will, but I know you will not, for it would demand an utterly noble and unselfish man."

"I cannot lay claim to any such title," said the young journalist, gently; "but I think I could take pleasure in helping you, all the more because I already take a great interest in the case of poor Conrad."

"Really?"

Her tone was incredulous.

"Indeed, yes. I don't know exactly why, but I felt an interest in the man from the first moment I laid eyes on him and saw him under the dominion of that brute who was killed by the convicts in their desperation. I wish I knew more about his case. I only know the outlines at present."

"I can give you all the papers," she said, quickly. "I have them all arranged in order. I have pored over them till my head reeled, trying to discover some way of unmasking the villain who wove his net so skillfully round that unfortunate man. Ah, Mr. Dulcie, it is a terrible thing to be condemned to death at eighteen, and imprisonment for life is as bad as death, if not worse. Fancy! To know, at eighteen years of age, that you must spend all the rest of your life herding with criminals. And life seems so long at eighteen. Oh, if I had only one friend in whom I could trust, on whom I could depend to help me now—"

"I am ready, if you will accept me for the office," answered Maurice, steadily. "Yesterday I could not have said as much. To-day I am independent, I may even say rich; and if you need help to unravel the plot which you say has been wound round this poor man, I am ready to help you."

She turned to him and put out both her hands as if to warn him away.

"No, no," she cried. "You do not know, you cannot tell to what I shall have to stoop to accomplish my purpose. Why should you sacrifice all your future on a thankless task? No, let me go my way alone. I thank you for your offer, but I dare not, must not, accept it."

Maurice rose up, rather pale, but with a look of determination in his eye that was a strong contrast to his bashful demeanor up to that time.

"Then I renew the offer," he said, steadily. "I ask no return but the pleasure of helping you and clearing the name of one whom I feel to be a noble man, who has been grievously wronged. If you will take my help on those terms, it is well; if not, let us part friends."

She looked up at him with her large, gray eyes, and saw something there she had never seen before. The shy young man had stuff in him of which he had not thought.

"But suppose I do trust you," she said, "are you aware that you must serve me without hope of reward; that you must expose yourself to danger, meet discomfort, discredit; dishonor, discouragement; and do all this for nothing?"

"You are wrong," he answered. "If I succeed I shall gain your friendship, and I feel now as if I would give the world to gain that."

The lady looked at him steadily.

She was thinking to herself, with a certain half scorn, born of experience:

"The boy has fallen in love with me already. Can I trust him? He looks innocent of the world's ways; but he has one advantage; he is honest, and I can read him at sight."

She held out her hand.

"Mr. Dulcie, I will trust you," she said. "You shall help me to clear the character of an innocent man, dead or alive."

CHAPTER V.

THE CASE.

"In the first place," continued the lady, "I must show you the papers in Conrad's case and tell you how it stands; but you must not ask me how I come to be connected with it. Suffice it that I am an old friend of his, that I could not believe him guilty. Here, first, is the lawyer's brief of the case. It is dry; but it will help you to understand the evidence delivered."

She went to a large escritoire, and took out a bundle of papers, which she opened. On top was a yellow covered, legal-looking document; the rest were old newspaper clippings, pasted on paper, and yellow with age. She sighed as she looked at them.

"Seven years ago," she said. "It seems only yesterday; and yet how long he must have found it in prison. They are the daily reports

of the trial. I saved them all, though I was far away when the trial took place—never mind where. Read the brief first, and tell me what you think of that."

Maurice obeyed, with a feeling of lively curiosity, and read as follows:

"THE PEOPLE vs. BURTON.

"ABSTRACT OF THE EVIDENCE FOR COMMUTATION OF SENTENCE, BY ALPHAEUS W. PECK,
COUNSELOR AT LAW.

"To his Excellency, the Governor:

"SIR:—The facts in this case as developed in the trial and taken from the evidence and the charge of Judge Vallance, are these:

"On the 17th day of July, the deceased Mr. Conrad Vargrave, then residing on his estate at Blanckville, Long Island, went out, after dinner, to smoke a cigar in a summer-house belonging to him, which was situated at the end of his private stone pier, and overhanging the Sound. He was in good health at the time, but rather affected with corpulence, produced by high living and sedentary habits, which made him feel the heat very much. The summer-house being the coolest place to be found, he had fallen into a regular habit of repairing thither for his after dinner smoke, and frequently fell asleep there. On the evening in question, according to the testimony of Antonio Natali—"

Dulcie stopped and looked at the lady.

"It says *Antonio Natali*. Is it the same?"

She nodded.

"Go on. You will see more presently."

"On the testimony of Antonio Natali, his body servant, who found him there dead, Mr. Vargrave went there as usual, and was seen smoking and talking to his grandson, Conrad Burton, who had just returned from college on vacation. Natali swears he heard loud voices, as if quarreling; but these died away and he thought no more of them. Mr. Vargrave being prone to fits of passion, with or without cause. Natali was in the habit of going to the summer-house at nine o'clock, to wake up his employer if he should find him asleep, and on this evening he went there at the usual time accompanied by John Hughes, the gardener, with a Bath chair, to take Mr. Vargrave to the house, if—as often happened—he felt too sleepy to walk. They found him in a large rustic chair, lying back, with his mouth half open, stone dead, his right arm on the rail over the water, as if it had fallen there in the last struggle. They alarmed the servants, sent for the doctor and took Mr. Vargrave to the house, thinking it an apoplectic stroke. The doctor, after a careful examination, found that death had been caused by a 22-caliber bullet—the smallest size made—which had been fired into the dead man's mouth as he lay asleep and had lodged in the base of the brain by the *medulla oblongata*.

"The propulsive force seemed to have been weak, as the bullet had only penetrated about one and a half times its length in the soft bones and cartilages at the insertion of the spinal marrow.

"The prisoner in this case, Mr. Conrad Burton, who was the last person seen with his grandfather, when questioned by the coroner, admitted angry words between them; but insisted that Mr. Vargrave had only been scolding him for interceding for his (Conrad's) uncle, Mr. Spencer Vargrave, then absent in Europe, and an extravagant, dissipated person. According to the prisoner's story, his grandfather had drawn a will totally disinheriting Spencer Vargrave and leaving him a dependent on Conrad's bounty, and it was for remonstrating against this will that Mr. Vargrave was scolding him, and complaining that every one was in favor of 'that worthless scoundrel,' as he called his son. Asked how he knew of the existence of this will, he drew it from his pocket and it corroborated his story in so far, Mr. Ebenezer Dulcie, of Seneca Falls, being appointed executor and trustee for Conrad Burton, till his majority."

Here Dulcie paused again, laid down the brief, and a flood of strange thoughts came over his mind.

His uncle Mr. Vargrave's executor, and trustee of his will! No wonder he felt such an interest in this remarkable convict. It must have been an intuitive feeling of the ties between their families in the past. Had his uncle neglected or kept the trust? To find out, he read on further.

"He was asked when he left his grandfather, and answered that he was not there more than half an hour, when he saw a squirrel close by, and immediately fired at it with a small pocket-pistol, he being very fond of pistol-shooting. Asked to produce the pistol, he did so; and it was found to be a 22-cal. pistol, with one empty cartridge. Then he was told, for the first time, of the discovery by the doctor of a bullet of the same size in his grandfather's brain.

"He exhibited fear, confusion, excitement, and declared himself unable to explain how it came there. He swore he had shot at and missed the squirrel's head, but had wounded it in the neck, and had found blood on the limb where it had been. Asked what he did after the shooting, he said he had chased the squirrel, but it got to its tree in safety, and he went to the house. Asked why he did not return to his grandfather, said he was afraid he would tease him about his bad shooting, so went to the house.

"This was all the testimony directly showing any propinquity between Conrad Burton and the murdered man on the night in question.

"Charles J. Hunt, an oysterman, swore that he heard the shot of the little pistol, and saw the prisoner run away to the woods at the edge of Mr. Vargrave's place. Thought nothing of it till the murderer was found out. This man had said among neighbors that he heard two shots, but on the stand he denied the story, as not being certain that the second one was a shot at all.

"The coroner rendered a verdict of death from a pistol-shot at the hands of some party unknown, there being no direct evidence to convict Conrad Burton with the shooting, save that of the bullet, and Mr. Dulcie proceeded to administer the trust confided to him, when Spencer Vargrave, who had

been in Europe, came home and everything was changed.

"He contested the will, hunted up all the witnesses who had testified on the trial, and finally procured an indictment against Conrad Burton for willful murder.

"In this trial, under the guidance of the able and skillful District Attorney, Mr. P. T. Foggerre, the witnesses brought out many facts that they had before concealed or forgotten.

"Antonio Natali, in particular swore that he had heard Conrad declare 'he wished some one would shoot that old hunk for him,' meaning his grandfather, and that 'all he cared for was to come into his money soon and not have to wait long for dead men's shoes.' This the prisoner vehemently denied, on oath. The judge charged the jury that if they found the deceased came to his death at the hands of Conrad Burton, they must judge whether it were by accident or design he fired the shot, and whether they believed it to be possible for any one else to have fired it. No attempt was made by the defense to show any such possible shot; and the senior counsel for the defense, Mr. Silverton, wisely or unwisely, confined himself to an appeal to the jury on the uncertainty of circumstantial evidence.

"The jury convicted the prisoner, without leaving the box, of murder in the first degree.

"The errors of the defense, as they seem to me, are as follows:

"I. They should have shown the possibility that the deceased might have committed suicide, with a pistol of the same size as that of his grandson. The position of his right hand, as found, was such that such a pistol might have fallen into the water after the man died.

"II. Natali's antecedents should have been raked up to discredit his testimony, which was the only damaging evidence given on the trial.

"III. The story of Hunt about hearing two shots should have been raked to the very bottom, and search should have been made around the place where Mr. Vargrave died for evidence of another cartridge.

"The only strong point in the case against Burton was the fact of a 22-cal. bullet being the instrument of death, the same which fitted his own pistol, but it was not shown directly that he fired it, neither was any motive shown for his so doing.

"In view of all these facts, we hope that your Excellency will see that the ends of justice will be served by commuting the prisoner's sentence to imprisonment for life, to give his friends a chance to hunt evidence fixing the guilt on the real party or parties.

"Respectfully submitted,

"A. W. PECK,
"Of Counsel for Prisoner."

"And is that all?" asked Maurice.

"All," was the answer. "The sentence was commuted, you know; but nothing has been found out since. Mr. Peck gave up the case after a year, and no one has cared to take it up till now, save myself, and it is only recently that I have seen my way clear to any thing."

"And how came that?"

"I saw in the papers that one Antonio Natali was on trial for burglary, and I went at once to Mr. Peck's office to get him to assist me. I found that he had gone to Europe, a week before, on a vacation, and is there now. I knew not what to do, except to watch the case of the burglar, and hired a detective to do it. Here is his report."

She handed him another document, not so long as the first, which ran as follows, except that it was badly spelled and even worse written:

"ANTONIO NATALI'S RECORD.

"Born in Naples. Once a bandit. Came to U. S. twelve years ago. By trade a cigar-maker. Bore the name, at the Lorillard Factory, of being the best man they had, except for stealing tobacco. Could make better cigars than any man in the trade; but discharged for dishonesty. Drove a hack; played the base viol in a Bowery orchestra; peddled; kept a peanut stand; finally got an engagement as valet to a gentleman going to Italy. Lost sight of till he came back to U. S. as the body-servant of Mr. Spencer Vargrave, from whose service he passed to that of Mr. Vargrave's father. Was a witness in the Vargrave murder case, and went abroad afterward with Mr. Spencer Vargrave. Left him in France, and was seen at Monte Carlo gambling tables, where he lost a great deal of money. Finally detected in cheating, got into a quarrel with a young American, stabbed him and escaped. Next seen in U. S., in company with a gang of English burglars. Tried to break into U. S. Treasury once. Caught at last at Arnold & Constable's, and sent up for fourteen years.

"ROBERT ECCLES."

"And killed the week after he got to Sing-Sing," added Maurice. "I wonder who it was furnished him the means of escape?"

Miss Benton cast a side glance at him from under her long dark lashes.

"That is one of the secrets that Colonel Keene would like to find out, but never will."

Maurice looked at her curiously, with a new light dawning on him.

"You don't mean to say that you know anything about it?" he ejaculated.

She smiled.

"I have said nothing."

"But you do know?"

"Perhaps. Money will do a great deal; but it is very hard for a woman to manage so many things at a time. Did you notice my new butler?"

"Your butler?"

Being a simple American, he hardly understood her.

"The man who opened the door to you."

"Oh, yes. I fancied I recognized his face, but I was not sure."

"Possibly you did. He knew you well enough."

"Yes. How was that?"

"Never mind. His name is Robins."

"Robins! It seems to me—"

Then it flashed on him in a moment that Robins was the keeper who had been dismissed from Sing-Sing for complicity in the escape of the two convicts, and he looked at the graceful lady beside him with a sort of terror, as he realized what a dangerous game she had been playing.

"Were you not afraid he would betray you?" he asked her in a low tone.

Beatrice Benton smiled a certain proud smile of her own.

"No one ever betrays me," she said; and the fascinated youth could easily believe it.

"If Natali had not been drowned," she went on with a sigh, "I might have found out a good deal. But that is all over now. We must begin anew, if, indeed, we ever find poor Conrad. In the mean time, I want you to help me."

"I will, if you will tell me what made you send for me," he answered. "It is the only question I shall ask."

"Robins gave me your name, and I knew at once who you were. I had seen your poor uncle frequently. He took his defeat in our case very much to heart. He was a good, kind-hearted man."

Maurice said nothing. His own recollections were not exactly those of kind-heartedness, but a man feels kindly toward another who has just left him a hundred thousand dollars, so he forbore to dispute the point with the lady.

Instead he asked:

"What has become of Spencer Vargrave?"

Her lip curled scornfully.

"He is in Europe—England, I believe, making the money fly."

"It seems to me," observed Maurice slowly, "that if we are to take any steps in this matter now, we must begin with him."

The lady looked at him steadily.

"And one who approaches him will have to do so without exciting his suspicions, and he knows me only too well."

"But he does not know me."

"True."

"I could approach him without exciting any suspicion."

"You might—but—"

"But what?"

"Do you think you are competent to track a murderer to his doom?"

"A murderer! Do you think he did it?"

"Who else had an interest in doing it?"

"That is what I said myself; but then he was in Europe at the time."

"He might have had an instrument here."

"You mean Natali. That, too, crossed my mind; but it will be difficult to prove."

"Oh, what would I not do for the man that proved it," ejaculated Beatrice, her eyes gleaming with a singular fire. "You do not know what that man has been to me—"

"Nor is that to the point either," said the young man as she stopped. "But I tell you that if Spencer Vargrave knows anything of this murder, I will drag it out of him, and when I have proven my case, then I will claim my reward from you."

She held out her hand to him.

"You shall have it, whatever it be," she said in a low tone, her magnetic eyes seeming to burn him up with their lambent blaze.

He trembled all over at the glance.

"You do not know what you promise," he answered, half whispering. "I may claim even yourself."

She snatched away her hand.

"Do your work first, sir."

"I will," he answered promptly. "Give me your orders. They shall be obeyed."

"Go to Europe by the next steamer," she said rapidly. "Find Spencer Vargrave; gain his confidence if you can, and write to me as soon as you find anything. In the mean time take these papers; study the evidence, and bring them back when you have mastered them. Good-night."

She dismissed him coldly, as a queen might have done, and he went out from her presence feeling like one of Mary Stuart's soldiers, ready to die for so fair a face, no matter whether it smiled or frowned on him.

As for the lady, she stood listening till the street door closed on him, with a slight frown on her face, when she murmured to herself:

"He will work harder than many another, and he has brains too. The rest he can learn. As for the reward, let the morrow take care of itself. Oh, Conrad!"

And the proud woman broke down and wept, all alone in the splendid chamber.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DERBY DAY.

ALL the world that speaks English has heard of the Derby Day; and English is spoken all round the world.

All the world of London goes to the Derby, and the world of London comprises people from all quarters of the habitable globe, thanks to the influence of trade.

The wandering Maharajah from the once powerful kingdom of Bundelabad, on his travels to pay his respects to the Empress of India, goes to Epsom on the Derby Day; and the Chinese Ambassador never misses it, any more than the Sultan's Envoy.

Parliament adjourns, the courts take a holiday; the public schools close; the Bank of England is deserted; the Stock Exchange empty of Bulls and Bears; and every one wends his way to Epsom Downs on that fateful day.

Yet, after all, it is only the annual race of the best three-year-old colts in England, for a piece of silver plate given by the Earl of Derby. There are plenty of other races with more valuable and splendid prizes; such as the Two Thousand Guinea stakes, the Cæsarewitch and others.

All the same, the Derby holds its pre-eminence among the races of the civilized world, and its "blue ribbon" is prized as much as the ribbon of the Garter, that never goes to any thing lower than an earl.

And the beauty of the Derby prize is that it is open to all the world. It has gone once to a Frenchman, once to a Hungarian count; and, when Maurice Dulcie arrived in England; there were rumors that it was possible it might go to a "Yankee horse."

Under such circumstances, every true American within traveling distance of Epsom was bound to be there, and they mustered in force that day.

The heaven of good Americans—Paris—knew them no more; Rome was empty of American art students; save those too poor to afford the trip to England—Baden-Baden was deserted, the Cunarders and Inmans were crowded with first cabin passengers going to England; and Maurice Dulcie, in the first flush of freedom and plenty of money, found himself among the crowd of pilgrims to the shrine of the great god Equus, ready to bet his last dollar on the colt that carried the stars and stripes.

And it is worth any man's while to go to the Derby, if only to see the crowd. Two hundred thousand people, packed into one place, round a race-course, make a big show and attract all sorts of speculators.

Acrobats, conjurers, contortionists, singers, Gipsies, soldiers, sailors, farmers, laborers, counter-jumpers, heavy swells, carriages of every variety, from the lordly four-in-hand drag to the humble donkey cart, all mingling together in democratic equality; princes of the blood, dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, barons, baronets, knights and commoners, from the top of the social ladder to the bottom; all were there.

Maurice Dulcie, a stranger in a strange land, wandered about, interested by every thing, but feeling rather lonely.

He had made a few acquaintances on the voyage, but had lost them in the crowd, and it was while seeking them that he gradually became aware of a tremendous noise near by him, which he traced at last to a crowd of people, some well, others ill dressed, who seemed to be on the point of engaging in a free fight, one with the other, within a railed inclosure that separated them from the other crowd outside of all.

They were shaking their fists at each other and yelling at the tops of their voices a confusion of words, of which he could make nothing, and presently he asked a decent-looking man who stood beside him:

"What in the world are those men doing?"

The Englishman favored him with a stare.

"Why, bless your soul, where were you brought up?"

"In America, my dear sir."

The man's manner changed.

"Oh, that's different. I suppose you couldn't help that—eh, sir? Well, that's the ring."

"The ring! What ring?"

"Why, the betting ring, of course. That's where the nobs loses their money."

Dulcie looked at it with new interest.

"What are they shouting then?"

"That's the odds on the 'orsés."

And in fact, when the young man listened attentively he could at last resolve the angry shouting into such phrases as:

"Seven to one against Bolter! Eight to one against King Cole! Three to one on Sioux! Twenty to one against Bramble."

These and the like, with an occasional wild yell of "Done!" made up the Babel of sounds that had confused him so much.

"Can a person go in there?" he asked his new acquaintance.

The man smiled pityingly.

"I wouldn't like to try it without being properly introduced by one of 'em. There ain't any rule against it, but, Lord! just see a stranger try it. Look, there's one now."

As he spoke, there was a violent commotion in the betting ring, and the shouting became more violent than ever, while all the people inside seemed to be rushing to a common center.

Presently he could distinguish that they were hustling an unfortunate man in the middle, without paying any apparent attention to him. All the while they were betting against each other, they were backing up against this

one man, shoving him from one to the other, knocking his hat over his eyes, plucking at his coat, treading on his toes, and generally making his life so miserable that he broke from the midst of the crowd, hatless, coatless, and nearly shirtless, and made his escape in a woefully-dilapidated condition.

Maurice Dulcie was amazed and shocked.

"Why, what had he done?" he asked.

"Went in without being introduced. You see the betting ring only belongs to the nobs. We as ain't nobs ain't allowed there."

"Are Americans excluded also?" asked Dulcie.

"Oh, no. There's one of 'em now, as proud as a lord. They call him the Yankee Plunger."

"Plunger? What's that?"

"A feller that bets high. Puts on a thousand at a lick and that sort of thing."

"And which is the great American Plunger, if I may ask?"

"That tall, fat young feller in the white coat. He's booking a bet now."

Dulcie looked, and saw a tall, stout young man, with a fat, pimply face, and a general look of reckless dissipation about him, as if he loved the pleasures of the table. He had dark eyes and straight, close cropped dark hair, and altogether was what might be called a bullying looking fellow.

"What's his name?" asked Dulcie.

His neighbor appeared to be thinking.

"Let's see. I've gotten. What is his name? Something with a 'grave' in it—Burgrave—Hargrave—no—Vargrave, that's it."

"Vargrave! Not Spencer Vargrave?" echoed Dulcie, with a start.

"Blest if I know, sir. The pleaseman'll tell you over yonder. He knows 'em all."

He indicated the polite guardian of the public peace who patrolled the vicinity of the betting ring, and who answered at once:

"Vargrave, sir? Spencer Vargrave? Yes, sir, the gent over yonder in the white coat."

Then Maurice Dulcie looked at the betting ring with a new interest. So this was the man against whose trains his own were to be pitted; this was the man whose plot against the life of his cousin Conrad, he, Dulcie, was to expose, if he could.

He watched him attentively from the railing on which he leaned; and saw that Spencer Vargrave was completely at home with the aristocrats whom his new acquaintance had called the "nobs."

Not that the betting ring had in it nothing but "nobs." There were a good many coarse, rough-looking fellows there, who shouted louder than the rest and made books with greater daring than some dukes. But these were professionals of the horsey kind, and a race-course is a great place for a man with a pocket full of money.

Spencer Vargrave seemed to have plenty; for Maurice saw him book bet after bet. He had the advantage of knowing his foe in advance, while Vargrave was ignorant of his person and purpose.

Presently a great bell clanged, and a man on horseback, at the head of a squad of mounted police, drove the people off the course, and the horses came up to the line of starting.

Maurice Dulcie, more by good luck than good guidance, found himself in front of the crowd near the winning post in front of the grand stand, and saw the horses start.

Then came the few minutes of breathless anxiety that herald the beginning of a race when the wildest crowd hushes into silent watchfulness, and at last there was a rush of swift forms over the green turf, and a roar went up from the crowd and could be heard rolling along at either side of the course, as the horses came by each individual fraction of the multitude.

Then arose a Babel of cries, every one betting louder than ever on the chances of those fast-flying, parti-colored jackets, and Maurice heard a voice roar above his head:

"Ten to one on Mohawk!"

It was the name of the American horse, and he looked round to see who was betting, and beheld the pimply face of Spencer Vargrave, purple with excitement, as he waved aloft his hand and book.

But no one took the bet; for already they could see the American's colors ahead of the rush of horses, as Mohawk came tearing along, his jockey having the reins drawn, showing that he was holding back for the final rush.

On came the horses as if borne on a great billow of cheers, and in a few moments swept by the winning post, like a flash, the American two lengths ahead.

Dulcie forgot all about Spencer Vargrave in shouting himself hoarse for Mohawk; and it was not till the crowd was breaking up after the race that he suddenly found himself, without thinking of it, close to that gentleman again, just as he was entering a lofty and elegant-looking four-in-hand drag, crowded with people.

"Hallo, Dulcie!" cried a cheery voice from the box seat. "Come up with us, old fellow. There's always room for one more."

Maurice looked up with some surprise, and recognized on the box seat an old schoolmate of his, whom he had not seen since they had fought a hard battle in school over a question of physical prowess, in which Maurice had got the worst of it.

He knew Tom Fenton in a moment, for Tom was one of those sort of boys who have manly features that don't change materially; and only a mustache marked the difference between the man Fenton and the boy Tom.

Tom Fenton had been a rich man's son, and Maurice the son of a retiring literary man, who had never made more than a bare living in all his life.

Naturally they had drifted apart, after leaving the school, and Maurice would never have claimed the acquaintance of the gilded youth had not the latter hailed him in the hearty way he did.

"We're all friends to-day, we Yanks!" cried the young fellow on the box, with a gay laugh. "I spotted you from the grand stand, Maurice, and wondered how you got here. Climb up. That's the way. Here, beside me. Gentlemen, this is my old schoolmate, Maurice Dulcie, one of the best fellows I ever knew, and we haven't met since we tried to whip each other at school, ten years ago."

Then the smart groom let go the heads of the leaders and jumped up to his perch, the drag rolled off, and Maurice Dulcie found himself surrounded by a jolly crowd of young Americans abroad, none of whom he knew except his host, but who all looked friendly in the common exultation of the American victory.

Spencer Vargrave was down on one of the back seats of the drag, and Maurice could not see him without turning his head, which he had no chance to do; for Tom Fenton kept up a running fire of questions that occupied all his time to answer, as they bowled along on the way to London.

When he heard that Maurice was free and had come to money, the jolly young fellow was quite delighted.

"For," said he, "I can't tell how it is, Maurice, but I've been thinking about you a good deal of late, and wondering what had become of you. Do you remember our fight, old boy? I don't know but what you could whip me now, if we tried it over again, for you've grown, and spread like a green bay tree, and I'm one of the kind that'll never be more than a light weight."

Maurice smilingly declined the honor of a new tussle, expressing himself as being a man of peace, who had given up all that sort of thing since he left school.

"And I believe you knocked sense into me, Fenton," he added; "for I used to think I could fight any one or any thing, and now I know I can't do any such thing."

Here their conversation was interrupted by a harsh voice in the back seat of the drag.

"Made! Not a blanked cent. I was on the wrong side of the fence, worse luck. It serves me right for taking points from one of those confounded jockeys!"

The voice was that of a man in very bad temper, and another answered:

"Wrong side of the fence! Surely you didn't bet against Mohawk, did you?"

"Yes, I did; and I backed Sioux, who was not placed. But I felt so sure— Why, I tried to hedge when it was too late, but no one would take me."

"Served you right, Vargrave, for not standing by the stars and stripes," called out Fenton from the box. "I'd keep still if I were you, and not let folks know I'd done it."

"That's all very well for you," retorted the voice of Vargrave—coarse as his face, Maurice thought—"but the thing mightn't happen again in a century. I betted on the average. Patriotism has nothing to do with betting. Look at Van Buskirk's horses. He brought them over, and they were all beaten. How was I to know that Mohawk would turn out a wonder, after so many failures?"

The advent of a loser among a crowd of jolly winners is apt to cast a chill over the rest, and there was a short silence in the drag as it rolled on over the dusty road, passing vehicle after vehicle in true Yankee go-ahead spirit.

"He's been bit pretty bad," observed Fenton, in a low tone, to Dulcie. "He's a crossgrained cuss at best, and when he's had a run of bad luck he's a regular hog, that Vargrave. I often feel ashamed to have him known as an American."

Maurice Dulcie could not help nodding slightly. He agreed with Fenton.

He stole a glance back at Vargrave, and saw that the young man's coarse face looked coarser than ever in its sullenness; but no words occurred between them as they bowled along, till the drag pulled up at the door of Fenton's lodgings, and the jolly party descended to hold carnival over their victory.

Maurice tried to excuse himself at first from joining the party, having no taste for inordinate champagne suppers; but Tom Fenton would take no denial, and fairly dragged him up the steps, while Spencer Vargrave, who had got out, followed the rest uninvited, and was about to

ascend the same steps when he was pleadingly accosted by a tall, dark, foreign-looking man, in rags of all colors, who cried out:

"Carita, signor, carita! Amor de Dio!" [Charity, sir, charity for the love of God.]

A common enough petition in London, where beggars swarm, and Italian beggars are as thick as blackberries.

Spencer turned away his head with a curse, and was going on, when the man actually laid his hand on his arm, and went on in broken English:

"Signor Vargrave—Amor de Dio! Von pennee—von—Dio, I starf—I cold."

It happened that Maurice Dulcie turned at that moment to look for Vargrave, in whom he naturally felt an intense interest, and saw the beggar with his hand on the lordly young aristocrat's arm, as he pleaded for charity.

He saw Spencer shake off the dirty hand as if it had been a profanation, and heard him say, fiercely:

"Confound you, be off! How dare you?"

The rest of the jolly party were crowding upstairs, noticing nothing, and the beggar shrunk back, only the eye of Maurice being on him; for Vargrave had turned away.

Dulcie saw the man's countenance change to an expression of bitter hatred as the American turned his back on him, and he shook his fist stealthily at Vargrave, while his lips moved as if muttering curses.

Dulcie waited till Vargrave had passed him with the rest, when he hurried down the steps and put a piece of silver in the man's hand and asked him:

"Do you know that gentleman?"

The Italian looked at the money and then at the giver, and was about to burst into the usual torrent of thanks—strictly professional—when Maurice checked him by repeating:

"Do you know that gentleman, Mr. Vargrave I mean?"

Then he put another piece of silver into the hand of the beggar.

A quick look of intelligence lighted up the dark face as the man said:

"Si, signor, si, si."

Maurice pointed over to Regent's Park—for Fenton's chambers overlooked it.

"Be there to-morrow at ten," he said quickly. "I want to talk to you."

The Italian nodded and the young man ran up the steps again just as Tom Fenton was shouting out:

"Where the deuce is Dulcie? Never run away from your liquor, man. Here's to Mohawk and the old flag!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BEGGAR.

IT was some time after ten o'clock next day when Maurice Dulcie bethought him of his promise to meet the beggar in Regent's Park. The fact was that the party at Tom Fenton's had been a little too jolly to let him off till after midnight, and his head had not been as steady as usual when he quitted the house at last, though he had drank as little as he possibly could in order to keep cool for watching the actions of Spencer Vargrave.

That gentleman had not imitated the prudence of Maurice but had proceeded to punish the champagne as soon as he got inside, to drown his sorrows. Spencer Vargrave, however, was one of those men who do not wax any the more good-natured when in liquor, and he soon became sulky and quarrelsome over the chaffing of his reckless companions, till Maurice and one or two of the cooler heads had to interfere to prevent the fight that seemed imminent.

Vargrave had been half persuaded, half forced into going home to his chambers, and had departed, vowing drunken vengeance on every one who had presumed to oppose him, especially Maurice Dulcie, who had happened to be prominent in quelling the disturbance.

This troubled the young man very little at the time, for he felt sure Vargrave was too drunk to remember anything; but he thought of it next morning when he woke up with a splitting headache, and found it was already past ten.

His chambers overlooked Regent's Park, for he had followed the London fashion of hiring a lodging instead of going to a hotel, and found it very convenient.

He dressed hurriedly and went out, where he soon perceived his beggar friend of the night before, seated on a bench under a tree patiently waiting for him.

As Maurice came nearer he looked at the other more attentively than he had the day before. Then he had only noticed the fact that the man was a tall, powerful fellow, in rags, his face covered with a short, bristling beard of several weeks' growth, with an appearance generally rather repulsive than otherwise.

To-day he noticed that there was something rather more singular than he had fancied in the looks of this man. His hair and beard were black; his complexion dark as that of an Indian; but as he looked up, Maurice met the gaze of a pair of light-blue eyes that should by all rights have belonged to a light-haired man.

Looking out of the dark face, they had that

vacant, spiritless expression that one sees in the countenances of hospital invalids of long standing, as if they had no further interest in life.

The man rose as Maurice came toward the bench, took off his battered hat with the obsequious servility of a mendicant, and began to pour out a flood of soft Italian thanks and blessings.

Maurice stopped him with a wave of his hand and observed:

"I don't understand enough Italian to talk with you in that language. Don't you think you could speak English?"

"Si, signor, si," answered the beggar in the same obsequious tone, "I spik-a ze Engleez perfectamente. I's all comprehend vat you-a say-a, eef it please-a ze illustrissimo signore to tell-a me."

"Very well," answered Maurice. "I had an idea you could, or I should not have come here. Now tell me, how did you know Mr. Vargrave?"

The beggar discharged all expression from his face, as he repeated:

"'Ow I know Signor Varagraffa? 'Ow I know 'eem? Signor, I do not know 'eem."

"You don't know him?"

"No, signor."

"But I heard you call him by name only yesterday, when you spoke to him."

"Signor, I 'ear 'eez friend call'eemd at name, and I say it myself—dot vas all. I do not know ze signor."

Maurice looked at him sharply; but the beggar never quailed. The young man felt sure the other was lying; but did not know how to expose him.

Presently he asked abruptly:

"Do you know a man called Antonio Natali, then?"

The beggar looked at him with a singular stare as he repeated:

"Do you know Antonio Natali, signor?"

"Never mind," answered Maurice, in a tone of some impatience. "I am asking you, not you me. You are an Italian. Do you know Antonio Natali?"

"No, signor, I do not know Antonio Natali," answered the beggar quietly.

"Then what is your own name?" asked Maurice, still more impatiently.

"My name, signor? I call-a myself-a, Siro; dat eez all-a—Siro."

"Well, Siro, let me tell you that if you choose to tell me what you know I will pay you for it. You know Vargrave, and I want to know how much you know about him. That's all."

Siro smiled slightly as he answered:

"I am poor man, signor. I would tell-a eef I could-a. Bote 'ow I tell vot I do not know?"

Maurice looked at him keenly, and at last turned away with a half sigh:

"I am sorry you will not trust me," he said. "I would not have come here if I had not thought you could tell me something. Why did you come here to meet me then?"

Siro raised his shoulders slightly.

"Ze signor ask-a me. I come. 'Ow I know vot ze signor vant-a vit me?"

Maurice said no more. He was, at the moment, thoroughly disappointed; for he had entertained glowing hopes of the revelations that were to be made to him by the beggar.

The fact of Siro being Italian had made him certain that the man was in some way connected with Antonio Natali, and here he was denying all knowledge of anything he might have been expected to know, and, what was worse, evidently lying about it and mistrusting Maurice.

Without even giving the beggar farewell, Dulcie went away toward the park gate, and presently almost stumbled on the very man he had been thinking of, namely, Spencer Vargrave, who was coming into the park, looking sullen and moody.

Their eyes met, and Spencer looked as if he were ashamed of himself, for he gave a sort of half bow and muttered:

"Good-morning, sir. I forget the name, but it seems to me I must have met you last night. Afraid I was a little full."

Maurice smiled.

"Perhaps we all had a little more than was good for us. Good-day, sir."

And he passed on into the street, only to turn behind one of the stone posts, on the pretense of lighting a cigar, but really to watch the proceedings of Vargrave.

He saw that gentleman pass on and go to the very bench where the beggar had again taken his seat; saw a swift signal of intelligence pass between them; and saw the beggar follow Vargrave as he walked on.

Then Maurice Dulcie suddenly said to himself,

"The beggar knows him and won't trust me. That looks bad. I think I'll try a little detective business on my own account."

He waited till they were out of sight in the winding walks, then re-entered the park and stole rapidly forward in a direction which he judged would intercept them. At last he caught sight of them, a little way ahead, mounting one of the high bridges over the Serpentine, saw

them disappear over the top of the arch, and at once ran forward to the foot of the slope of the bridge.

As he got there he heard the sound of voices on the other side, and first came the unmistakable tones of the beggar saying:

"Dere is no von 'ere, signor. Ve can spik-a 'ere, ver' well."

"Well then," answered the sullen tones of Vargrave, "speak out. What do you want and who are you? You followed me home last night, and told me you had something of importance that you would communicate to me here. To get rid of you I said I'd come, and here I am. Now then, what is it?"

Maurice wondered at what he heard. So then, this Vargrave must have something to fear, or he would never have arranged an interview with the beggar.

"Signor," said the voice of the Italian, "I 'ave one frien' dey call Natali. 'E is dead now; but 'e tell me something before 'e die. You vant to 'ear eet, signor?"

Maurice wished he could have seen their faces: but, that being impossible, he listened intently to detect any changes of voice.

Presently Vargrave growled:

"Well, what did he say?"

"'E say, signor, dat 'e 'ave a crime dat rest on 'eez conscience, a crime commit for anoder, 'ooze name vas-a—vot name you tink-a 'e say, signor?"

"How the devil am I to know?" asked the sullen Vargrave, snappishly.

"'E say, signor, dat de name vas Signor Vargrave, a *milord Americano*, and dat Signor Vargrave vould admit it."

Maurice heard a sneering laugh.

"He did, did he?" said Vargrave. "Well it is sometimes astonishing what fools people will be. So he claims to have committed a crime for my sake does he? What was the crime then? Give it a name."

"Do you vant me to say eet aloud?" asked the Italian in a peculiar way.

"Certainly. Speak it out, man. I'm not by any means afraid."

But Maurice noticed that his voice shook.

"Ver' vell, signor. De crime dat Antonio Natali say 'e commit, 'e 'oo vas your *valet de chambre*—your man—dat crime vas call **WILLFUL MURDER!**"

He spoke the last two words high and sharp, with hardly a trace of foreign accent in his voice; and, hurried by an irresistible impulse, Maurice Dulcie stole up the slope of the bridge to look down.

The beggar had his back turned; but he had drawn up his fine figure so that he looked a very different person from the skulking, shambling outcast that had solicited charity the day before.

As for Spencer Vargrave, he was staring at the other in a singular manner, trying to brave it out; but for some reason not able to do so effectively.

He tried to laugh, and brought out a ghastly chuckle as he said:

"Well, is that all?"

"No, signor."

"What then?"

"'E tell me, signor, all about 'ow de crime-a vas commit. You vant me to say?"

"How then? Yes. I am curious to hear."

"You are curious, signor. Ver' vell, I vill sav it in your ear."

He stepped forward and whispered something in Vargrave's ear which caused the American to start back, crying:

"It's a lie! Who told you?"

The Italian laughed.

"It eez true, signor, for 'e make de t'ing, dat do de murder 'eemself. You know vat vas Natali by trade, signor?"

"I never asked. I don't want to know. It's all false. But here, here, take this. You look as if you wanted money. Don't speak of this to any one. Not that it is true, but—"

"But it is best to keep dese t'ings in de familee, signor," observed the beggar in a singular tone.

As he spoke, he took a capacious pocket-book handed him by the other, and put it in his bosom.

"I s'all beed you good-day, signor," he said, with the bow of a disguised nobleman. "I s'all do myself de plaisir of see you vonce more at Parigi. You say Paris. Signor, *addio-ma*—no, *a riveder la*." [Au revoir.]

He swept off his battered hat with the grace of a king, and stalked away down one of the paths while Vargrave stood watching him with a singular look on his face.

As for Maurice Dulcie he slowly fell back out of sight behind the bridge, took a circuit and came round again, so as to intercept Vargrave all of a sudden at the turn of a walk.

As he had anticipated, Vargrave started violently, though he tried hard to look easy, and Maurice spoke:

"Why, what's the matter, Mr. Vargrave? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Vargrave smiled in a ghastly manner.

"Do I? I fancy I've a bilious attack on me, and I must stop drinking, Mr.—ah—"

"Dulcie is my name—Dulcie."

Vargrave seemed to be confused at the name as Maurice had expected.

"Dulcie," he stammered, "any relative of Ebenezer Dulcie?"

"His nephew, sir."

Vargrave stood looking at him in a sullen, furtive way as if he began to hate him.

"Your uncle's dead I believe," he said.

"He is, sir; but he left me several legacies, of all which I am careful. Among others was one to clear the name of one Conrad Burton whom he believed to have been unjustifiably punished for a murder he never committed."

Vargrave had grown calmer now, and said with an affected sigh:

"Ah, yes, poor Mr. Dulcie never would give up that case. It was a pity too. There never was a clearer case, Mr. Dulcie. The poor wretch was my own cousin, and I tried all I could to save his life; but the evidence was too strong. Will you have a cigar? I am going toward my chambers, and shall be charmed to entertain the nephew of my old friend Dulcie."

Maurice bowed a little coldly. He could not help seeing the insincerity of the offer, and suspecting some ulterior purpose behind it, so he said:

"Very much obliged; but I have but a few days in London, and I must devote them to sightseeing. We may meet again in Paris. I am going there to see the races, and find if Yankee luck is as good as it has been in England. Are you going?"

"Yes, of course," answered Vargrave hastily. "Never miss a race. We'll meet there. Sorry you won't come with me. Good-day."

Maurice went back to his chambers and thence to the sights of London, while Vargrave walked moodily to his own rooms, muttering:

"Dulcie, Dulcie. What the devil's he doing here? I wonder if—oh bosh! he knows nothing. No one does except this fellow, and I'll get rid of him pretty soon, as I got rid of Natali."

That evening Maurice Dulcie was at the theater and scanning the house between the acts.

He gave an irrepressible start as he looked into one of the private boxes, where a group of ladies, attended by some officers of the Cold-stream Guards, were chatting gayly together.

"It cannot be," he muttered to himself. "I left her in New York acting. What can she be doing here now?"

But as he leveled his glass at the lady who had attracted his attention, he saw that he had made no mistake.

It was Beatrice Benton herself.

But what had brought her there? He knew that she had been in the hight of a very successful engagement when he had seen her in New York; and yet she was here in London, not acting, but looking on with the unconcern of one whose only business was pleasure.

He thought he would pay a visit to the box to see for himself; but just at that minute the curtain drew up, and he could not get up without disturbing his neighbors, which no American would do. And when the curtain finally fell and he looked again toward the box, the lady had gone and the box was empty.

More puzzled than ever at the mysteries which seemed to surround him, he went out of the theater determined to find out, if he could, what had become of the lady. As he hurried into the street a carriage drove away, and he saw it turn a corner and go toward one of the fashionable quarters of London.

Hastily calling a cab, he said to the driver:

"Follow that carriage and don't lose sight of it, and I'll pay you well."

"All right, sir," answered cabby, and away they rattled over the hard road.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FUGITIVE.

THE departure of that carriage from the doors of the theater, as it happened, proved of interest to more than one person that night, and within two minutes after Maurice had dashed off in pursuit two other cabs rattled after.

One of these cabs contained Spencer Vargrave, who had been sitting in a box nearly opposite to the actress, and the other was hired by a tall man with a thick, scrubby beard, who came quietly out from the recess of a neighboring doorway as soon as Vargrave's cab set out, and said to cabby:

"Follow that cab till I tell you to stop."

Then the four vehicles rattled away over the smooth macadamized pavement of Piccadilly, and Maurice Dulcie's cab was so close to the carriage that the driver was nearly running into it as it drew up in front of a large, handsome house.

"Go on to the corner," said Maurice, in a low tone, to the driver, "and stop after you've turned."

Cabby obeyed, and the young man got out.

As he came to the corner, he saw the door of the house open and two ladies go in, while a gentleman bowed and went back down the steps to the carriage.

Maurice Dulcie watched the carriage till it had turned the corner, and then went up the steps himself.

At first he had thought of ringing the bell and asking for Miss Benton, but a moment's reflection convinced him that this would be an improper course at so late an hour. He satisfied himself that the house was No. 71 Carlton Terrace, and then went back to his cab and drove home, expecting to call next day.

As he drove off, Spencer Vargrave, sitting in another cab nearly opposite the house, muttered to himself:

"So he is after me, is he? And she, too? Well, let's see them catch me."

Then Spencer got out of the cab, ran up the steps, took down the number of the house, re-entered his vehicle and drove off toward his own lodgings.

As he passed out of the street he came on a third cab standing by a corner house, the driver apparently asleep on his perch. Just as he passed this, a man who had been hiding in an areaway came out, took his way toward 71 Carlton Terrace, rung the bell boldly, and was admitted.

He remained in the house for nearly an hour, after which he was seen coming out, and walked toward the cab at the corner of the street.

The sleeping driver waked up with a start at the sharp order:

"Come, cabby, drive to the Langham Hotel, quick, and that's all for to-night."

Then the third cab rattled off, and all was quiet on Carlton Terrace.

The man in this third cab, as far as he could be seen in the dark, was tall and heavily built, and had a beard.

As he descended at the Langham Hotel he put into the driver's hand something that caused cabby to say, respectfully:

"Long life to your honor. I likes to meet a reel gentleman, and 'tain't often as we finds 'em nowadays."

The stranger nodded absently.

"All right, driver."

Then he went into the hotel and up to a room near the top of the house, where he lighted the gas and sat down by the window as if in a thoughtful mood, gazing vacantly over the long rows of lamps in the streets beneath.

One might see then that he had a face naturally very handsome, though now disfigured by the fact that his hair was rough and short like a scrubbing-brush, and his beard in the same unsightly state. Both were of the same dull black, but his eyes were light-blue approaching gray, and one might see on close inspection, at the roots of hair and beard, a yellow tinge that showed both to be dyed.

The room in which he was, had the look of dull respectability and ugly parsimony common in the apartments reserved for single gentlemen in hotels all over the world, unless the single gentlemen happen to be commercial travelers.

A narrow bed, a small wash-stand, a single chair, the guest's carpet bag; that was all inside.

But outside were the myriad lights of a great city at night, with that dull hum that never ceases and tells of the many that must toil while others sleep.

The man with the dyed hair sat by the window looking out and muttered:

"Three million people crowded together in one city, and ten out of every hundred a pauper like myself, dependent on charity. A good place to come to; a good place to stay in. And he is here too, as prosperous as if he had never driven other men to curse God that let such creatures live. But his time is coming; it must come. And when it does come, then, Beatrice, then—"

He did not finish the speech, for at that moment his eye was attracted by the figure of a man on the pavement below, on the opposite side of the street. This man had been walking slowly along and had stopped and seemed to be looking up at the house.

In a singularly furtive manner the man with the dyed beard crept across the room and extinguished the gas jet; then returned to the window and looked out again, as if he feared to be seen.

The watcher on the other side of the way was still there; looking up as intently as ever, and the man with the dyed beard began to talk to himself.

"What does he want there? He looks as if he were watching for some one. Can it be that—"

He crept back to his carpet-bag and took out an opera glass, with which he looked long and earnestly at the silent figure below.

Then one might have seen the man at the window wipe off the sweat from his brow and heard him mutter:

"What is he doing here?"

He trembled all over as he looked down, and uttered a sigh of deep relief as the watcher at last moved away down the street.

"I must get out of this place," he said to himself as he went back. "There is no safety for me anywhere till I have proved my case. The law is against me wherever I go, and I can not shake off the old influence. I believe if I were to see some one who knew me in the prison I should break down at once and betray myself."

I must leave London. And to think that of all places in London I should come here, where all the Americans resort. I must get out of it before I meet some one that knows me."

He quietly took up his carpet-bag and went down-stairs to where the night-clerk was nodding at his desk.

The man looked up in some surprise.

"What's the matter, Mr. Brown? Are you going away so soon?"

"Yes. Isn't there a train to Dover to connect with the early boat?"

"Yes, sir. Euston Square Station, half-past three. Going to Paris?"

"Yes, I think I will. Any one else going from here?"

"Let me see. No. There's going to be a crowd to-morrow, though, to go to the French races. One of your Yankee horses is going to run. Wish you luck, sir. Here's your bill, Mr. Brown."

Mr. Brown paid his bill and departed alone for his walk to Euston Square station, on that calm summer night, where the stars were shining above and the lamps below all over London.

When he got to the station he took a ticket for Dover, and soon found himself in one of the luxurious compartments of a first-class car, waiting for the train to start on its way.

While he waited he sunk into a corner, and presently in bustled a stout elderly man with a long gray beard, the upper lip being shaven in the peculiar style only seen in old-fashioned Americans of a certain age.

This old gentleman was talking to the porter as he came in, and kept up his talk after he got in to his neighbor.

"Mighty uncomfortable time to take the cars, sir; but I hate a crowd, and the train will be crammed for the second boat. Going to the races, sir?"

"Yes," responded Brown, briefly.

"Grand thing for us Yanks," broke in the stranger joyously. "I'm not a racing man myself, but I swear I'm as much interested in the fortunes of our stable as if I were. What a splendid victory that was at the Derby! Eh, sir? Oh, I beg your pardon, but perhaps you are an Englishman."

"No, sir," responded Brown, as briefly as before.

"Ah, indeed! Then you can sympathize with our little pardonable exultation. What part of the United States are you from, sir?"

The old gentleman peered at the corner as he spoke, through a pair of round spectacles.

Mr. Brown stayed back in the shadow, and responded quietly.

"From the West, sir."

"Ah, indeed! Great section, sir. Very fine country. Haven't been there since the war. Traveling on business or pleasure, sir?"

"Business."

"Ah, indeed? Well, I'm on a pleasure trip, as one may say, rubbing off the rust. Been in a dry business, sir, forty odd years. As dry as can be. Law, sir, law. Quite a change from bullying juries to being bullied by waiters and porters. But there's a good deal of pleasure in traveling, after all. There's so much to see, sir. Been at St. Paul's?"

"No, sir."

"Ah, indeed? Perhaps you liked the Tower or the British Museum better. You've seen the National Gallery, of course."

"No, sir."

The old gentleman looked surprised.

"Ah, indeed! Ah well, there's no accounting for tastes. Going to put up at the Grand Hotel, I suppose."

"No, sir."

"Ah, indeed? Well now, I wouldn't go there myself, only I can't talk French, and all the waiters there understand English. You talk the language well, I suppose."

"Passably, sir."

"Wish I did. Ah, there goes the bell. We shall have the compartment to ourselves. Do you smoke, sir?"

"No, thank you, sir."

The tone of the man in the corner was not so chilling; for the kindly gossip of the old man was beginning to thaw him out of his reserve.

The old gentleman hesitated.

"You don't object to smoking, I hope?"

"Not in the least."

"Ah, very much obliged."

And he lighted a cigar and begun to smoke with great comfort and satisfaction.

"Very bad habit," he observed presently between puffs, as if he couldn't resist the temptation to talk. "Wish I could get rid of it. Been wishing that for forty years. Yet I keep on smoking all the same."

He relapsed into silence for some minutes as they whirled along, and at last broke out:

"Oh, confound it, man, we're both from the same place and in a strange country. My name's Peck, Alpheus W. Peck, at your service. We ought not to sit *mumchauco* like a couple of Englishmen."

The man in the corner laughed slightly.

"I suppose not. My name is Brown."

Mr. Peck puffed hard at his cigar and observed dryly:

"I know a good many Browns."

"Well, to be plainer, George W. Brown."

Again Mr. Peck puffed out a cloud.

"A very good name, Mr. Brown. May I ask what business you are in?"

Mr. Brown hesitated a moment, and said:

"My business is private and personal."

The old lawyer drew back.

"I beg your pardon. No offense. Only asked out of curiosity. I believe Americans abroad seem to think every one else is on pleasure trips like themselves."

Then he sunk back into one of the deep cushioned recesses of the compartment and began to smoke more fiercely than ever, casting occasional glances into the dark corner where the stranger sat, as if he would like much to see his face, but did not quite like to stare.

Presently the guard came round to the window and called for the tickets.

When he had gone Mr. Peck suddenly remarked:

"Funny system, here."

"How so?"

"So different from America. Conductor called a guard. Got to climb around outside the train, while we're locked in like so many prisoners. Reminds one of it. Ever been to State's Prison, sir?"

The other started angrily.

"What do you mean?"

Mr. Peck laughed.

"Oh, no offense. I didn't mean as a prisoner, only a visitor. I've been at Sing-Sing several times. Ever there?"

"No, sir."

"Ah, indeed? Bad place. Very bad. I've not been there for a long time—seven years. Had my last criminal case then."

The man in the corner said nothing but to echo in an indifferent tone the lawyer's usual "Ah, indeed?"

"Yes, sir, it was the last criminal case I ever undertook; and I've never taken another, solely because I was disgusted with my own stupidity in not being able to find out how a man was killed."

"How was it?"

Mr. Peck seemed full of talk, and wanted nothing better than the opportunity to do so.

"It was a very curious case," he said. "An old gentleman called Vargrave was found dead with a bullet in his brain, fired through his mouth; and no one could tell how it got there. They arrested a man, whom I firmly believed to be innocent, for the crime, and condemned him to be hung; but I helped to get a commutation to imprisonment for life. And from that day to this I've been puzzling my brain over how that bullet came into that man's brain, and I can't for the life of me tell."

The silent Brown in his corner stirred uneasily and said:

"Suppose you knew, it would do no good to the case. The man's dead, and the other man is in prison for life."

"That's true; but I could get a pardon for him, if I could prove it."

"But, if the man was innocent he should be justified, not pardoned," said Brown in a low voice.

Mr. Peck shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, that's all that could be done for him. The State can do no wrong, you know. She takes the place of the king in the old times. A pardon on such a basis is different from a common pardon."

Mr. Brown seemed to be interested; for he sat up in the corner and asked:

"And suppose you were told how the bullet was fired, and could prove the possibility of its being done in the most singular manner, what good would it do you if the murderer were dead?"

Mr. Peck shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd find a way, if I could only find out how the bullet got into that man's brain, even if the man that fired it was dead."

Mr. Brown leaned forward from his corner into the full glare of the lamp and said quietly:

"You have had the solution of the whole mystery in your grasp all this while, and you don't know it."

Mr. Peck stared at the other through his spectacles, puffed at his cigar vigorously for some seconds, and then threw the stump out of the window, observing:

"My young friend, will you explain what you mean? If ever I do lay my hand on the solution of that mystery, it will be a dear day for the man that made it."

"You are wrong," answered Brown, calmly. "You will throw it away or lose it, as you have already done, time and time again. We are approaching Dover. We'll meet again on the packet."

The whistle shrieked; the train rushed into Dover, and Mr. Alpheus W. Peck was as mute as a tortoise for once. He was thinking over the other's words.

CHAPTER IX.

COLONEL KEENE.

ALTHOUGH Maurice Dulcie had fully intended to pay a visit to 71 Carlton Terrace the next morning, he was destined to be disappointed again, or rather to forget all about it, for he

was aroused soon after daylight by a furious ringing at the door-bell, and found his rooms invaded by a regular incursion of gay young fellows, with Tom Fenton at the head, who had come to carry him off for the second boat to Calais.

The whole American colony was just as crazy about the Grand Prix de Paris as it had been a day or two before about the Derby, and on the same account; and Maurice could not withstand the pressure. So he dressed himself in a hurry and was whirled off to the station, and thence, in a compartment full of his countrymen, to Dover, and on board the mail-steamer *Vivid*, that lay puffing volumes of black smoke from her funnels.

But once outside, in the short, chopping waves of the Channel, he had more time to think; for, one by one his companions deserted him and ceased their noise.

It was blowing hard from the west and the tide was coming in from the other side by way of the German Ocean, so that between the two arose a short cross sea that tossed the little *Vivid* about like a cork, and made almost every one terribly sea-sick.

Maurice Dulcie, having only recently come off a long voyage, was one of the few exceptions, and soon found that he had the deck all to himself and one other person, a gentleman, who kept pacing the vessel impatiently from bow to stern, with the high collar of an ulster raised so as to hide his face from view, while he evidently avoided the society of every one else.

Perhaps it was this very thing that made Maurice all the more curious to see the face, and he maneuvered so as to meet the stranger as often as he could without actual rudeness.

But the man in the ulster seemed to know what he was at, and purposely to avoid him; so that Maurice was forced at last to follow him to the bow of the boat, where the spray dashed at intervals high over the bulwarks, before he could get a square look at the retiring one.

He had no sooner done so than he uttered a cry of surprise.

"Why, Colonel Keene! What in the world are you doing here?"

It was indeed the thin, eager-looking face of the governor of the prison, that he saw, with its blue eyes and long, drooping blonde mustache; and it wore an expression of angry impatience as Colonel Keene retorted:

"Why the deuce couldn't you leave me alone? Didn't you see I didn't want to be recognized?"

Maurice drew back, offended.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon. I did not know who it was, but you are the last person I expected to see here, and in a strange country all Americans are apt to greet each other. I beg your pardon and will not trouble you any further with my presence."

He was turning away in dudgeon, when Keene said hastily:

"Don't get mad, Dulcie. I don't want to offend you; but the fact is, I'm here on business, and don't want it to get out where I am. I spotted you as soon as the boat left the dock, and I was afraid you'd let out the fact that I am on board. Now it's too late, and it can't be helped. I rely on you to tell no one who I am, except as Mr. Orville. I am going under that name for awhile."

Maurice turned coldly away.

"If you wish it, I'll not recognize you at all; but I don't see why you should be going under an assumed name. I suppose you are on leave."

Keene looked at him doubtfully for a moment and answered:

"I'm not on leave. I'm on duty."

"On duty!" echoed Maurice. "What has this place to do with the prison?"

"I've left the prison."

"Left the prison?"

"Yes. Resigned, and gone into the secret service. Now perhaps you will understand."

Maurice looked closely at him. There was a fierce, eager look about the colonel's face, a darkness under the eyes, that told of overwork and loss of sleep; and he could not find it in his heart to resent Keene's unsociable behavior any further.

So he said:

"How did that happen? I never heard of it. What was the cause of your resignation?"

"Didn't you see it all in the *Herald*?"

"No. I've not seen an American paper for several weeks. Not since I left New York in the steamer."

"Very well, then. There's no harm in your knowing it. All the rest of the world does. It all came of the time you were at Sing-Sing. Do you remember the escape of two convicts while you were there?"

"Of course I do," answered Maurice, his heart beating a little faster in his excitement. "They were run over by the St. John, and drowned before our eyes."

"They were no such thing," returned Keene, impatiently. "I was fool enough to think they were; but one of them, at least, got off and was helped out of the country on the steamer *Victoria*."

"How do you know that?"

"I received the information after he was on the seas, from a woman; and I know it to be reliable because it came from a woman who was furiously jealous of her lover."

Maurice smiled.

"You reason closely, colonel. Who was the woman, if it's a fair question?"

Colonel Keene looked at him sharply.

"I don't know if it's a fair question or not; but it's no harm to tell you, because it's all in the paper, if you want to know. It was the girl of Robins, the keeper, who was arrested and put under bail for conniving at the escape. He skipped his bail and went to Europe with another woman, and this girl, in revenge, wrote to me, blowing the whole plot."

Maurice did not need to ask who the other woman was. He felt in his heart that he knew already. But he wanted to find out all he could from Keene, so he asked him:

"Are you sure the information was correct, colonel?"

Keene nodded.

"I know it, or I should not be here."

"Do you know whom Robins went off with? Are you sure?"

Keene looked at him with a slight smile.

"Now you're coming at something that's not in the papers. Yes, I do."

"Is she in England?"

"No, she's on board this boat."

Maurice could not help starting, and Keene's eye noted the start.

"Aha!" he said, "so you know her too."

Maurice calmed himself by an effort.

"Perhaps I do."

Then he turned and walked away to the stern of the boat.

Keene watched him and presently followed him. As they both stood at the stern he said sharply:

"Well, are you for or against the law? I'm after Conrad Burton; and you know something about him. What is it?"

Maurice faced him composedly. He had had time to think.

"If you are after Conrad Burton to get him back into prison, you are in a bad business, in the interest of a bad man. Have you ever seen Spencer Vargrave?"

Keene shrugged his shoulders.

"No. I understand he's a hard case. But that has nothing to do with the escape of a convict. As long as Conrad Burton is at large, my reputation as governor of the prison is under a cloud. For that reason I resigned. For that reason entered the secret service, and I'll follow him all over the world; but I'll find him and take him back."

Maurice Dulcie looked at the slight figure, so thin and wiry, and at the hawk-like face of Colonel Keene, with a new feeling. He began to feel afraid of this man.

"But suppose Conrad Burton is innocent of the crime with which he was charged," he said. "Is it not a cruelty to shut him up in a place where he can never prove his innocence, while the true criminal is at large? Wait till you see Spencer Vargrave, and you will say that he is much more likely than the other to be accessory to a murder."

"I see," replied Keene rather sarcastically, "that you are on his side for some reason or other. What it is, I guess. They tell me she is a very fascinating woman."

Maurice colored furiously.

"Colonel Keene," he said haughtily, "you are exceeding the limits of friendship when you undertake to bring a lady's name into a case like this."

Keene laughed.

"I haven't mentioned any names. Come, Dulcie, you're not sharp enough for the errand you're on. Let it alone, or you'll burn your fingers. To show you that what I say is true, I'll let you into a secret. The woman who has fooled us both is on board this boat, and she saw Conrad Burton last night. She is going to France to meet him and her lawyer."

"Well," answered Maurice quietly, "suppose she is. That does not alter the case. She is a noble woman, striving to clear an innocent man from a stain that he does not deserve. I honor her for it, and so should you."

"Dulcie, when a woman takes so much pains for a man, who is, after all, only an escaped convict, she must have some very powerful motive to animate her."

Maurice looked at him haughtily.

"What do you mean?"

"She must be either his sister, his wife or his mistress. Conrad Burton never had a sister. Consequently, if you are working for this woman you are working for something you'll never get."

Again Maurice colored high.

"You seem to know a good deal about my affairs," he said haughtily.

"Possibly I do. For instance I know that you visited this lady before you came away, and that you tried to see her last night."

Maurice laughed triumphantly.

"There you are wrong. You see you don't know everything, Keene."

Keene shrugged his shoulders.

"I know this, that you'd better give it up."

You can't prove anything that you hope to prove, and you can't upset the verdict of a jury. By-the-by, what did the lady say to you when you visited her?"

Maurice laughed again.

"How do you know I saw her?"

"From Robins's girl, a lady's maid. You see I'm quite frank. She watched you; for she was in the house when you visited it. Give me a smart woman for a detective any time. She would not have betrayed her man and her mistress if he hadn't been fool enough to go off without her. Trust a jealous woman to have revenge."

"And what did she say?" asked Maurice incredulously.

Keene seemed to be debating some point in his mind, but at last he said:

"They know it all, and they're only making a fool of you. You might as well have your eyes opened. Look at this letter."

He handed Maurice a letter, badly spelled and worse written, which ran as follows:

"MISTER KEENE, SIR:—The papers sez that them convicts was drowned as run away from Sing-Sing. I seen one on 'em yesterday nite at Miss Beatrice Benton's house. He's lettin' his hair grow and his beard too. My husband, James Robins, has run away with Miss Benton to Europe and the convict is with 'em. Thur is another on 'em gone before, as a stowaway on the Austria. They fooled you on the river by hidin' under a boat and one of 'em changed clothes with a corps. The lady is gone to meet the stow away. They is all in one gang, and my husband is one of 'em. He have left me alone after he promised to marry me and she have discharged me without warnin' me to look out for another place. Ware she is, you may look for the rest. "MARIAN ROBINS."

Dulcie returned the letter quietly.

"Well," asked Keene, "what do you think of that now?"

"I think that a discarded lady's maid would say a good many things, but I wouldn't trust her."

Keene laughed.

"So do I. I haven't trusted her, but I tested her story and found it true."

"How much of it?"

"All. Both Burton and Natali were under that overturned boat, when we saw it come to the surface. They both got to New York and there separated. One of them did get aboard the Austria as a stowaway, and was found in the coal-hole when near Liverpool. I found that out after I got here. From the description it must have been Natali, for they said he only jabbered Italian. The other one was of course Burton. He got to the lady's house one night, and the very next day, she, Robins and this fellow, in the capacity of a servant, started for Europe on the Victoria. She even broke a very lucrative engagement to come away. So you see, Dulcie, they're a bad lot, and the best thing you can do is to tell me what you know and drop the whole business."

Maurice turned away from Keene and paced the deck in an agitated frame of mind. The colonel's revelations made him think of the whole case in a very different light as he listened.

Before that, he had been priding himself on being the only champion of a beautiful woman in a worthy cause, and now he began to see that the people most interested in the cause were perfectly able to do without him. He began to suspect the identity of the beggar he had seen in London with Conrad Burton, and to remember how the latter had declined to trust him.

Then too the sharp gnawing of a secret jealousy began to annoy him at Keene's words that he was "looking for a reward he would never get."

"Conrad Burton never had a sister and this woman is either his mistress or his wife," he thought. "In either case she is trying to use me as a tool to benefit him, and perhaps laugh at me afterward. What a revenge I could have by sending him into Keene's hands."

But then arose in his heart a better feeling, and he suddenly turned to Keene and said:

"Find your own way. Fight your own battles. I will not help you. On the contrary, if I can warn this poor fellow that you are on his track, I will do so."

Keene nodded his head quietly. He did not even look vexed. On the contrary there was a certain tone of admiration in his voice as he said:

"You ought to have been born in the Middle Ages, Dulcie. You're too much of a poet for the nineteenth century. Let it pass. Confounded rough sea here in this little strait, isn't it? Worse than the Atlantic Ocean ten times over. One comfort, it's not a long passage."

Then he passed on to indifferent topics, and no one would have fancied, from his manner, that he was full of impatience on his quest, till the boat began to draw into the calmer water near the harbor of Calais. Then Maurice excused himself abruptly and went down into the cabin, where he hastily penciled a few words on a card and sent it by the stewardess into the ladies' cabin.

Beatrice Benton, not at all seasick, but with an anxious look on her face, was sitting by a stern window when she read it:

"They are after him. I will save him. Do not recognize me when you see me. MAURICE."

She smiled to herself.

"I knew I could trust him."

CHAPTER X.

THE PRIX DE PARIS.

THE race-course at the Bois de Boulogne was crowded to see the grand event of the day—the Prize of Paris, and the representation of the American colony was naturally large.

In the midst of the crowd, wandering about, to all appearance aimlessly, the face and figure of Colonel Orville Keene might have been seen, had any one been watching for him closely.

One man was, and that man was Maurice Dulcie. He had hovered near Beatrice Benton all the way from Calais, and had noticed that Keene was never far away. The two frequently met, and the colonel always cast on Maurice a certain look of mockery, as who should say:

"You can watch, but you're not quite sharp enough for me."

Then arose in the young man's mind a certain sense of being pitted against the other's brains, and he felt a dogged determination to foil Keene at any risk.

He had found one thing with some surprise, that Beatrice Benton was only attended by a French maid, and had joined herself to an English party which she never left. They seemed to be very fashionable people, with the peculiar stony glare of British aristocracy at all outsiders, and Maurice found out at the hotel where they stopped that they consisted of Lord and Lady Armitage, well known in London as the heads of a certain circle that affected aesthetic tastes and delighted in having literary people and great actors and actresses in their train.

Besides Miss Benton, there were in the party a great tragic actor, an Arctic explorer and a celebrated singer.

He had half expected to find Robins in the train; but, seeing no signs of him, concluded that the lady had left him in England, which was the fact.

He noticed, also, that Keene's face, whenever he got a chance to look at it unsuspected, began to wear a puzzled expression. The sharp detective was evidently wondering if he had not made some mistake in sticking so close to the lady.

Maurice, once or twice, got a chance, also, to exchange glances with Miss Benton, and saw that she understood him. Exactly how he received the impression he could hardly say; but it came to him with fresh force at the race-course, when he managed to get near her carriage, unseen by Keene, and saw her smile at him.

He had almost made up his mind to try and speak to her, when the bell rung to clear the course and the gendarmes came riding into the crowd to disperse the people, waving their long swords.

In common with the rest he was driven back, amid a great deal of pushing and French cursing, till he found himself in another part of the course, when his attention was attracted by some one crying, in English:

"There's no need of pushing so hard. We can all see if you only stand still. What rude people these Frenchmen are, and I thought they were so polite."

Maurice looked round and saw an old gentleman with a white beard and round spectacles, who was being unmercifully hustled to and fro by a number of Frenchmen of rough appearance, quite regardless of his expostulations.

He saw in a moment that they were making fun of a foreigner, and that more than one belonged to the fraternity of pickpockets, so he shouted out at the top of his voice to a gendarme, who sat on his horse near by:

"Thieves! They are robbing an American."

As he spoke French, the gendarmes turned and rode into the crowd, when the men around the old gentleman melted away with the most innocent air, and Maurice ran his arm through the other's, saying:

"You're an American, I see, and don't speak French. Those fellows were trying to rob you. Have you lost anything?"

The old gentleman, with many expressions of surprise and gratitude, felt all his pockets and declared he had not, after which he continued:

"You're very kind, my dear sir. I suppose I ought not to have come out without some one who understood the language, but I never had any trouble before. If you'll be kind enough to stay by me for a while, you'll confer a great favor on a man old enough to be your father, and we'll have a little dinner together. One thing these Frenchmen can do, and that is to get up a good dinner. My name is Peck, sir, and I shall be happy to make your further and better acquaintance."

"And my name is Dulcie," returned our friend, cordially. "Glad to have been of some service to you, sir."

The old gentleman looked at him sharply.

"Dulcie, Dulcie," he said. "That's not a common name. Any relation to my old friend Ebenezer Dulcie?"

"His nephew, sir."

"Ah, indeed? Well, well, well, who'd have thought it? Didn't you ever hear him speak of me, Alf Peck? I forgot to say that my given name is Alpheus. Quite a rare name and a good one."

Maurice looked at him with interest.

"I have heard the name, sir. Are you not a lawyer?"

"Well, yes, that is to say I was till I gave up practice and took to amusing myself."

Maurice looked round and saw no one but Frenchmen near, so he said in a low tone:

"Were you not once connected with a case in which my uncle was interested on behalf of Conrad Burton?"

Mr. Peck started.

"Bless my soul, young man, what do you know about that case?"

"I can tell you that some other time, sir, but just now let me tell you that Conrad Burton has escaped from prison, along with Antonio Natali, who was the witness that convicted him, and that they are both now in Paris, together with Miss Benton."

The old lawyer listened to him with close attention and asked him:

"Who was that last; Miss Benton? Who is she?"

Maurice looked surprised in his turn.

"Don't you know her, sir? Why, she has a brief of the whole case in your writing, signed by you, and I understood that—"

Mr. Peck interrupted him unceremoniously.

"I know whom you mean. What! is she here? Where?"

"In a carriage just under the Grand Stand, with Lord and Lady Armitage. Would you not like to see her?"

The old lawyer made no answer. He stood there with his rugged face knit into a mass of wrinkles, frowning as if he were thinking deeply, and muttering some disjointed words to himself that Maurice could not catch.

"No, no; I don't want to see her," he said, a moment later. "I've given up practice, and I can't be bothered."

"Not if by seeing her you might aid in solving a great mystery and righting a great wrong?" asked Maurice, gently.

Mr. Peck flushed slightly.

"You're right, young man, you're right. I might do some good, but I doubt it. The time has gone by too long. You say Conrad Burton has escaped, and with Antonio Natali? How came they together?"

Natali was sent to Sing-Sing for burglary, and the two made their escape together."

"Hum! hum! that's queer, very. Funniest thing I ever heard. If Natali would only make a clean breast of it, he might be able to prove a good deal; but he never will, I'm sure."

"And why not, sir?"

"Because it's physically certain that either he or Conrad Burton must have killed that old man. I believe he did it. And if he did he won't tell on himself."

"He might sir, if—"

Here Maurice felt a sudden twitch to his sleeve, and, looking round, found a small boy at his side, who shoved a note into his hand and wriggled away through the crowd with the ingenuity of a true Paris boy.

Maurice opened it and read:

"Be careful. Two men are watching you and one is listening."

There was nothing to indicate the writer, and Maurice was perplexed. He looked round him but saw only the usual French crowd with no face that he knew, and just then the cheering began and the horses went skimming by for the great race.

Maurice, however, had lost all interest in the race in the greater one of the exciting case on which he was engaged and he watched carefully all round him amid the shouting to see if anything suspicious occurred.

Presently the suspicions engendered by the note were verified as he caught sight, some little way off in the crowd, of the face of Spencer Vargrave, looking straight at the back of the lawyer, with a glance of anything but friend-ship.

One man was watching, surely. But who was listening? Several might easily have done so, but Maurice fixed on one out of all the rest, who had a sinister foxy face.

This man stood close to them, staring over their heads up at the trees that lined the course as if he felt a special interest in arboriculture, but Maurice caught him looking at Mr. Peck also, and decided that he must be the listener. To make his suspicions more definite he proposed to Peck a visit to the grand stand and the two struggled off through the crowd till they found themselves under that edifice.

As soon as they were safely established Maurice looked round, and, sure enough, the foxy-faced man was already behind them, staring up at the trees as before, though Spencer Vargrave had vanished. Thus Maurice hesitated no longer but whispered to Peck:

"There is a man behind us, listening to what we say. What shall we do?"

The old lawyer wrinkled up his face and set his lips firmly.

"This is getting interesting," was all he said. "I think its time we went to dinner."

Maurice started.

"To dinner? What do you mean?"

"I mean that if we wait till the race is over, all the restaurants will be crowded. I know a nice little place near here where they have English waiters. Come along."

They pushed their way out of the crowd, till they came to open ground when Mr. Peck said in a low tone.

"Keep out of the crowd. Any one can follow us in a crowd; but out here they can't come near without being recognized. I think Conrad Burton is near us."

"How do you know?" asked Maurice.

"I saw you read a note. What was in it?"

Maurice handed it to him and Mr. Peck after he had read it, quietly tore it into small pieces and put them in his pocket.

"I knew he was here," he observed. "It was written by him. Come along to the dining-room. Ah! there's our friend looking for us. I think he's a police spy. Do you know if any American detective is after him or not?"

Maurice told of Keene's presence and Peck said reflectively:

"Keene? Keene? That's a new name."

"He was governor of the prison at the time Burton escaped and has given up his place to become a detective."

"Hum! hum! Thought I didn't know the name. Where is he now?"

"Somewhere in that crowd, where I saw Spencer Vargrave too."

"Oho! so he's there too. Well, this is getting very interesting. Now, then, I must see this lady you spoke of and the question is how shall I do it?"

"I'll take a note to her if you wish," was Maurice's offer.

"That might be well—or stay. I don't know whether it would be safe. You go to her and tell her verbally that my address is at the Grand Hotel and that whenever she wants me I'll come. I'll stay here till you come back."

He entered the restaurant of which he had spoken and sat down at a table by the window from whence he could watch the outside and see Maurice Dulcie traverse the open space and mingle with the crowd again.

He saw the foxy-faced man standing outside in a hesitating way and laughed to himself.

"So you are Mr. Vargrave's spy are you? That shows Vargrave has some cause to be afraid of me. He must know of Burton's escape. Why then does he not have him arrested at once? There is something very funny about this. I wish I had cross-questioned that man who called himself Brown. I had a notion that I knew his face. If I had only known of Burton's escape I should have been sure. And now he keeps out of my way. Holloa! Who's this?"

A wiry, alert-looking gentleman with a blonde mustache came into the restaurant and took a seat at a table near by in such a way as to command a good view of Peck, and the lawyer said to himself:

"That man's on this case and I know it. There's something a little too knowing in his face. He can't hide it."

The waiter who had been hovering near now came up and respectfully but firmly suggested that it was time for an order.

"For the crowd will soon be here and there will be no time to attend to the wants of monsieur as they deserve to be attended to."

Mr. Peck ordered dinner for two and suggested that he was waiting for a friend who would soon be in.

As he gave the order he saw the alert-looking gentleman glance at him quickly over his paper and almost at the same minute the foxy-faced man entered the restaurant and took a seat at another table whence he could see both men who had entered before him.

While the waiter was gone to execute his order, Mr. Peck pretended to read his paper, but watched his watchers.

After a little while the door of the house opened again and he muttered:

"Aha! This is still more interesting. The head devil himself has arrived."

In fact Spencer Vargrave came sauntering into the *cafe* in his usual half-careless, half-sullen manner and took his seat in such a way as to command the three who had entered before him.

Then the old lawyer began to speculate on what connection lay between the three, and noticed one curious thing.

While a rapid glance of intelligence passed between Vargrave and the foxy-faced man, the alert-looking gentleman looked at both with obvious curiosity and then turned his furtive regards again on Peck, as if he did not know the others.

"That must be Keene," thought the lawyer. "It corresponds with the description. But is he in concert with the others or not? I wish Dulcie would come."

Very soon Maurice Dulcie made his appearance, and came and sat down by Peck, looking a little pale and breathing hard.

"We are watched," he said in a low tone. "Don't you see who is in the room?"

"I see only one I know," answered the old lawyer in the same tone. "Is that man with the blonde mustache Keene? I thought it must be, from your description."

"Yes; what are we to do? Shall we take a private room?"

"By no means. You know Keene and Vargrave; don't you?"

"Yes."

"Ask them to dinner."

Maurice stared.

"What for?"

"To face the music. I want to find out if they know each other."

"Of course they do."

"There's no of course about it. I'll try it first. I remember Vargrave."

The old gentleman got up and went to the sullen youth.

I thought I remembered your face, but I wasn't certain, Mr. Vargrave. My friend Dulcie and I are going to have dinner. Won't you join us? Americans in a strange land, you know. Ought to be sociable, eh?"

Vargrave turned red, stammered, but at last got up and shook hands, saying:

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged. I shall be very happy. Certainly."

Then Peck led him back to the table with a lurking smile of triumph on his face.

"Mr. Dulcie," he said, "here's an old enemy of mine that time has turned into a friend. Haven't you another?"

CHAPTER XI.

A CHECK.

As he spoke the old lawyer looked straight at Keene, who was glancing furtively at them over the top of the paper he was pretending to read, and Maurice went over to the colonel and said in a low tone:

"You're watching us. That is Mr. Peck, our lawyer, and Spencer Vargrave. Will you join us, and how shall I introduce you?"

For the first time in their acquaintance Colonel Orville Keene looked surprised.

"Is that Vargrave?" he asked. "Why I thought he was a very different man. Yes, I'll join you, if you really think you can get the best of me. Introduce me as you please."

A few moments later these four men, with such diverse interests, were at the same table, to all seeming perfect friends, but every one watching the other, as the old lawyer had known they would, Vargrave and Keene more embarrassed by the invitation than they cared to show, Vargrave especially seeming to distrust Keene as much as the others.

Then the eyes of the old lawyer twinkled behind their glasses, and he began a flow of conversation on indifferent subjects, which he kept up all dinner time, ordering wine and playing the host till the *cafe* was full of people, while Keene kept casting many glances out of the window, where the crowds were now sauntering about between the races, as if he wanted to get away.

Maurice, not knowing exactly what to make of it all, yet followed his companion's cue, knowing that the lawyer had some object in keeping his foes so close to him.

What that object was appeared after the dinner was over, and when Mr. Peck had paid the bill.

He turned to Vargrave then, saying:

"Well, sir, we've had a pleasant chat and a good dinner, and I've kept you here as long as I want to. I am going back to London to-night to meet a client of mine in a very mysterious murder case. I will bid you good-day now. You have done just what I wanted you to do."

Vargrave stared at him as if wondering what he meant; but the old lawyer turned to Keene with undiminished coolness.

"Colonel," he said, "you are well named. You are indeed awful keen; but not so keen as Alpheus W. Peck, Counselor-at-Law, at your service. While you were dining here, trying to pump me, your prey has escaped you. You may as well burn that requisition in your pocket. You'll never have occasion to use it. Good-day. Come, Dulcie."

Without another word he walked out of the *cafe* with Maurice, and as soon as he got outside whispered:

"All bounce. I don't know a thing; but I've scared them for all that. Now, then, what did she say?"

"I didn't see her," answered Maurice. "I saw some one else, though."

"Whom?"

"Burton. He must be mad, for he's on the Grand Stand, and if Keene sees him it's all up with him."

"On the Grand Stand. The last place they would think of looking for him. Where? Not with her?"

"No. With a party of Germans, and he looks like a German himself."

"Yes. He can do that. You know he was brought up at a German University. How did you know him?"

"I didn't till he spoke to me. It was he sent me that note by the boy, I think."

Mr. Peck looked astounded.

"Speak to you?"

"Yes, in the crowd on the Grand Stand. I was trying to get near Miss Benton, when he pulled my sleeve, and whispered to me."

"What did he say?"

"Only a few words. 'You are Maurice Dulcie,' he said, 'and are in more danger than I am. Don't smoke. It's bad for your health, especially when Spencer Vargrave is around.' Then he turned away to his friends; for he seemed to have plenty there, and looked as if he'd never seen me before."

"Didn't you speak to him again?"

"I tried to, but that was the strangest part of the affair. Just at that moment the people began to move away on the stand, the race being over, and we were separated. When I came on him again he looked at me as if we'd never met; talked German at me, and pretended not to understand me."

As he spoke Maurice started and pressed the old lawyer's arm.

"There he is," he muttered.

As he spoke, there came a group of tall, well-built blonde men, with long waxed mustaches or fair beards, unmistakably German in their appearance; and in the midst of them was the very man of whom they were speaking.

Peck noted the tall, stalwart frame that overtopped the best of his friends and said to himself:

"It is he. He can never hide that face."

But what surprised both him and Maurice was the fact that the young man was going straight toward the *café*, as if he felt perfectly secure.

And before either of them could muster up resolution to warn him, out of the *café* came Spencer Vargrave, and met his cousin face to face.

Maurice looked for an immediate and terrible explosion; but to his surprise none came.

On the contrary, the eyes of Spencer Vargrave fell before those of the escaped convict, and he shrank to one side, while the group of stalwart Germans passed on.

And then, on a sudden, he heard a voice cry, in the sharp tones he knew so well:

"Aha! I have you at last."

At the same moment the wiry figure of Colonel Keene came out of the *café*, and made a spring into the midst of the group.

"Here, gendarmes," he cried rapidly in French, "an escaped convict, arrest him!"

And as he spoke, he laid his wiry hand on Conrad's shoulder.

In a moment all was confusion, a Babel of tongues jabbering French and German all round, while the man arrested looked down into the resolute face of Keene, and growled in German:

"Let me go, fool. I don't know you."

Maurice was about to rush forward to the rescue himself when a very strange thing occurred.

Spencer Vargrave, who had been standing as if thunderstruck, suddenly threw his arms around Keene and wrenched him off, crying:

"Run, run."

Then came a sudden rush of people and a wild scuffle, very much like a free fight in the good old times "before the war" anywhere on the Mississippi, and, when it was over, Maurice found himself and Mr. Peck surrounded by gendarmes, while Colonel Keene, with his coat half torn off his back, and his face bleeding from several scratches, was swearing furiously at Spencer Vargrave, and the Germans had all vanished into the crowd.

A grave looking commissary of police, with a tri-colored sash, was trying to pacify Keene, who was shaking a paper, while he scolded.

Maurice listening, heard the commissary say:

"But monsieur was wrong to try to make the arrest himself. The requisition was for us to execute. Had we known of the presence of this man, we would have had him safe, and now we must find him."

"You could have had him as soon as I did," cried Keene fiercely, "if it had not been for this man here. He interfered and I demand his arrest for obstructing the law."

"I couldn't help it. He was my cousin," said Vargrave pleadingly. "I knew that this man had no authority to arrest him."

"Monsieur is right," decided the commissary stiffly. "This requisition has to go to the Government to be countersigned, and then we can produce the man within twelve hours at furthest."

Mr. Peck pinched Maurice's arm.

"Let's come away," he whispered.

Maurice obeyed, and when they had got a little way off, the old lawyer observed:

"I begin to see light in this case, and it lies in Conrad Burton. He knows something, and Vargrave is afraid he'll let it out. He dare not have him arrested."

Maurice looked at him in surprise.

"Do you think so?"

"I know it; and what's more I'm going to Paris with him. I'll find out what this secret is, before I'm twenty-four hours older."

"And what am I to do?" asked Maurice.

"Find the lady, and give her my address. Then meet me to-morrow at the Grand Hotel. I'll see you at ten o'clock."

He went away with the now rapidly-thinning crowd, and Maurice saw him talking to Vargrave, while Keene went off with the commissary of police, who seemed anxious by his politeness to make up to the colonel, for his recent discomfiture.

As for Maurice, he hunted about through the crowd, looking for the Germans he had seen with Conrad Burton, and at last found them in another *café*, drinking together, but without their recent friend.

As soon as he entered he saw that they recognized him; for he detected covert glances from one to the other; and he felt a perfect fever of curiosity to know who these men could be.

They had the appearance of gentlemen, and a certain haughty stiffness about them that belongs to no one so much as a German army officer.

They seemed to look down on the French with great contempt, and kept to themselves, talking German.

It was, however, with the utmost politeness, and in very fair English, that one of them addressed Maurice at last, coming over to the table at which he was sitting.

"Sare," he said, "I was told of you by mein goot friend, you know who. He say to me to tell Monsieur Dulcie dat all will be right in de goot time. De trut' vill come out, and you s'all be friend."

Maurice looked at him doubtfully.

"Excuse me," he said, "but there is a great deal of mystery here, and I think that I, who am a friend, deserve confidence. I do not even know your name."

The German smiled.

"Dat is true. I am Hauptmann Von Werder, sare, at your service. Mein freund and I, ve vas at Gottingen in de same year! 'E coom to me, 'e say, 'Von Werder, I am in trouble.' I say to 'em, 'You are mein bruder. I 'elp you.' Ve are all bruders."

"Where is he now?" asked Maurice.

The German shook his head.

"I must not tell. He is safe from these French *polizeidieners*. Ve 'elp him."

Maurice sighed.

"I wish he'd trust me. I only have his best interests at heart."

"'E know that, sare. 'E desire me to say to you dat 'e did not know you in London, but now 'e have see madame, and she tell 'em 'ow you vas goot freund."

"Very well," answered Maurice quietly. "If you see the gentleman—"

"I s'all not see 'em, sare. 'E is gone."

"Gone! Where?"

"Where de *polizeidieners* cannot get 'em till 'e vant to be taken, sare."

"Very well," resumed Maurice, "then I have nothing to do but thank you and bid you good-day."

The German saluted with grave politeness; and the young man left the *café*, and went in search of Miss Benton, hoping to learn more from her, and resolved to go up to her at any risk, openly.

But, search as he might through the grounds he could see no sign of the carriage in which she had been, and at last he came to the reluctant conclusion that she had gone back to Paris.

To Paris therefore he took his way and proceeded at once to the hotel where the Armitages lodged.

He inquired for Miss Benton and was informed that no such name was on the books of the hotel.

"She was with the party of the English milord, Armitage," said Maurice.

"The English milord has gone, monsieur."

"Gone? Where?"

"To Marseilles. The party took the train immediately on returning from the races. Milord, I believe, contemplates an Eastern tour, and meets his yacht at Marseilles."

Maurice went away, more mystified than ever. What did it all mean?

He departed for the Grand Hotel to see Mr. Peck, and ask further instructions. He knew that the lawyer stopped there. When he got near the hotel he saw a crowd at the doors and the uniforms of gendarmes. His heart began to beat faster as he went forward. What new trouble was in store for this remarkable case which he had taken up so earnestly? He pushed through the crowd and asked the first man he met:

"What is the matter?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"A man has killed himself, I believe."

"Who is it?"

"But what do I know, monsieur? They say it is an American. They are a people very extraordinary, these Americans."

"Do you know his name?"

"But no, monsieur. The dame of the counter will tell you."

The "dame of the counter" was the lady cashier, and to her went Maurice. He noticed that gendarmes were in the passages, and going to and fro, up-stairs and down, with an air of waiting for somebody.

The dame of the counter was as polite as ever in response to his questions.

"But it is a gentleman American has killed himself in his room, monsieur. The gendarmes are waiting for the judge of peace, to examine the body; and it will be taken to the Morgue."

"Had the gentleman no friends? What was his name?"

"His name, monsieur? Let us see. It was a name American, Peque, yes that was it, Peque, Peque."

"Peck!" echoed Maurice, horrified. "Not Alpheus W. Peck, a lawyer, with long white beard!"

"Yes, monsieur. Does monsieur know him for example?"

"Yes, yes," answered Maurice hastily. "I came here to see him, I must see the body. This is horrible."

"Monsieur can apply to the commissary of police at once. No one else seems to know the poor man."

To the commissary of police went the young man and hastily explained his desire to see the body, for he had known the gentleman in life.

He was passed up a regular chain of gendarmes on duty and conducted to a handsome room, where he found the old lawyer lying back in a large easy-chair as if he had fallen asleep with his head bowed on his breast, as small stream of dried blood having escaped from the corner of his mouth and left a dark stain on the beard. On the table before him on which his hand rested, as if it had fallen there, lay a small pistol.

The gendarmes watched Maurice with the suspicious closeness of police officers, as he advanced to the body.

He felt stunned at the discovery, for he had had high hopes of success in his quest, with the assistance of the shrewd old lawyer.

"When was he found thus?" he asked one of the gendarmes. "Was he alone? Was no one with him?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Monsieur can ask the judge when he comes. He is expected at once. We are not allowed to answer questions."

Just then came a clatter of arms in the corridor, and the expected official arrived, with a notary, a big book and several commissaries.

With them Maurice was not surprised to see the ill-omened face of Vargrave.

CHAPTER XII.

THE INVESTIGATION.

The judge proceeded to examine the body, with scrupulous care not to touch it in any manner whatever.

He walked all round it and scrutinized the chair, the table, and the room, in perfect silence; after which he made a sign to the notary, who sat down at once to write.

"The man is dead," observed the judge, sagely. No one dissenting, he continued:

"Let the man who first found the body be brought forward to be questioned."

A trembling waiter was introduced, who testified as follows:

"The dead gentleman had entered the hotel, looking tired, in company with another gentleman who was now present."

Asked to indicate the gentleman he pointed to Spencer Vargrave, who nodded his head gravely.

"The gentleman had parted with his friend amicably, and they had exchanged cigars at parting. The dead gentleman he had noticed was a great smoker of cigars; but never used cigarettes, as is the custom of our country, monsieur."

"The witness will confine himself to the material facts," observed the judge, with severity.

"What have we to do with the habits of smoking of the deceased? Go on and tell what you saw."

"Truly, monsieur judge, I saw nothing, for the dead gentleman went up to his room after he had lighted his cigar, and I saw no more of him till I found him sitting there, dead."

"For what reason did you enter his room?" asked the judge.

"The dead gentleman had ordered me to bring to his room a jug of water with ice in it, after the American fashion, monsieur, and I did so."

"How soon after he had gone up?"

"About an hour, monsieur. He told me there was no hurry, and I had other things to do."

"And when you came in, did you disturb anything?" asked the judge.

"Eh, monsieur, but no, I would not have dared. Besides, I was frightened. I ran away at once, and called the gendarmes, and they came. That is all that I know, monsieur."

The judge called next on Spencer Vargrave to tell if he knew anything, and the young American at once entered into a verbose explanation of his few facts any many theories, Maurice Dulcie listening intently all the time, with a vague suspicion in his mind that Vargrave knew more of the affair than he could be induced to tell.

"He was an old friend of Monsieur Peck, and had met him that day at the races, after a long

separation. They had had many things to talk about, and had left the Bois de Boulogne together and walked back to the hotel. Monsieur Peck had been always a great smoker of strong cigars, and he, the witness, thought that the old gentleman had injured his brain by too much smoking. He had found him depressed in spirits, and talking a great deal about death in a gloomy way. The witness had tried to cheer him up, but with little avail; and they had at last parted. He had entreated Mr. Peck not smoke too much, or at least to try a brand of cigars without so much of the strong poisonous oil of tobacco in them. Mr. Peck had consented to try one of the witness's cigars, and they had exchanged. The witness had found the one given him so strong that it had made him sick though he was an old smoker, and he believed that a long course of such smoking must have weakened Mr. Peck's brain and finally driven him to suicide."

The judge nodded sagely.

"A very probable conclusion. Let the surgeon examine the body. Who is this gentleman?"

He looked at Maurice as he spoke, and the young man explained that he had been with the deceased at the races and had come to the hotel to meet him.

The judge nodded.

"Very good. You are a friend of his. We will examine you after the surgeon has reported."

The police surgeon took out a case of instruments, opened the mouth of the corpse, probed carefully, and finally produced a minute leaden bullet from the back of the palate, which he showed to the judge.

"Well, monsieur doctor, what do you find to be the cause of death?" asked the judge, briskly.

"A bullet in the base of the brain, that has been fired through the mouth, monsieur judge, probably from the small pistol on the table."

The judge nodded to a commissary.

"Examine the pistol."

The commissary took it up, and Maurice saw that it was a small 22-caliber revolver, of one of the innumerable cheap and nasty patterns that abound in American arm-shops in the Bowery.

"One chamber is empty," said the commissary, "and the pistol has been fired recently."

Then the judge nodded to the notary.

"We can make up the report at once," he said. "There is no doubt as to this case."

"Pardon me," observed Maurice Dulcie, quietly, "but you have not examined me yet, monsieur judge."

The judge looked at him coldly.

"Well, tell us what you know of the deceased, monsieur."

"I knew but little of him," answered Maurice, steadily; "but what I did know convinces me that Monsieur Peck did not commit suicide. He has been murdered, and that pistol has been placed before him by the murderer."

While he was speaking he watched the face of Spencer Vargrave very closely, and noticed a certain flickering pallor on it, while the other kept his eyes on the floor, but listened intently.

The judge surveyed Maurice with a great deal of interest, and the gendarmes stared at him as if he had been a new sort of wild beast.

"Monsieur," said the judge, gravely, "are you aware that you are making a terrible accusation against the first person who found this body and the last person seen with him? Are you prepared to prove your words?"

Spencer Vargrave looked up furtively at Maurice, and wiped his forehead as the young man went on:

"I saw Mr. Peck this morning, and he was perfectly cheerful. There was no evidence of morbid thoughts in his conversation. He and I were much interested in tracing out the clew to a murder which took place in America seven years ago, in the very way in which this death has now occurred. Monsieur Peck was then the lawyer for a man who was accused of having shot his grandfather, just as Mr. Peck has now been shot, through the mouth, with a bullet of the smallest size. While we were conversing on the subject at the races, a small, dark man with a cunning face was close behind us, listening to our conversation, and at a little distance off we were being closely watched by that man."

As he spoke, Maurice wheeled round and pointed straight at Vargrave, who said nothing, but smiled sarcastically.

The judge settled back into his chair and said nothing, but looked as if he were getting interested.

"Mr. Peck," continued Maurice, "went to Paris with that man, not as a friend, but to find out what he could from him about the murder that took place seven years ago, for which an innocent man suffered; and no one but that man had any interest in removing Mr. Peck. I declare to you my conviction that this is not a case of suicide, but of murder, and that the clue to it lies in the hands of—that man."

Again he pointed to Vargrave, and again Vargrave smiled sarcastically.

The judge looked puzzled.

"What monsieur says is very singular," he

observed, "but it is not evidence. Has monsieur no facts on which to base his suspicions? It is obvious that the man was killed by the bullet in his brain. It is equally obvious that the bullet was fired from that pistol."

"But it is not certain that the dead man fired the shot," said Maurice. "His door was not locked. He might have been asleep and a robber have entered—"

"There is no evidence of a struggle nor of robbery," said the judge, coldly. "I begin to fear, monsieur, that you are wasting our time. Have you any facts to offer on which to base an accusation of murder against any one? If you have, I will order the arrest, and you will be detained as a witness."

Thus adjured, what could Maurice do?

He had in truth nothing but vague suspicions to offer, and stubborn facts lay before him that he could not contradict.

He had no resource but to withdraw and listen to the formal drawing up of the report which declared that Alpheus W. Peck, American traveler, had committed suicide under the pressure of mental disease induced by nicotine poison."

The papers were full of it next day and half a dozen editors wrote long articles on the evils of excessive smoking.

Maurice Dulcie sat puzzling his brain to explain the case, and yet could find nothing on which to hang any sort of a theory, so he finally gave it up as a bad job and took to walking the streets in silent thought.

It was then that he became aware that he was being watched and followed by a tall, dark man, with a hard, stern-looking face, who kept near him wherever he went, and he began to dread all sorts of unknown dangers.

Was this man a spy of Vargrave's?

He determined to find out.

Waiting till he had found indubitable evidence that he had not been deceived, but that the man was really on his track, he turned and walked up to him in the midst of the streets.

"You are following me," he said, sternly. "What do you want?"

The man looked at him stolidly.

"I have my orders," he said.

"From whom?" asked Maurice.

"From the commissary of police," was the stiff reply. "I am doing my duty not to lose sight of monsieur till he leaves Paris."

"Till I leave Paris? Then you will not stop me if I go away?"

"I have no such orders, monsieur: none save to report your departure."

Maurice began to feel uneasy.

"And shall I be watched on the road?"

"That is not for me to say, monsieur."

"Very well, then. I shall leave Paris on the next train."

The man looked at him with a sort of pitying smile.

"Monsieur would do much better to go back home among his friends. It is not good for persons in the poor health of monsieur to be away from their friends who can take care of them."

"What do you mean?" asked Maurice, angrily. "I am quite well."

The man tapped his forehead and said in a tone meant to be soothing:

"Monsieur should be careful. The day is hot and sunstrokes are very bad things for the brain."

Then it suddenly dawned on the mind of the young man what was the matter.

This man was a member of the secret police, ordered to watch him and see he came to no harm, as being one of unsound mind.

They thought he was mad.

No sooner did this idea get into his head than he became anxious to leave Paris at once; for he did not know at what moment it might enter the heads of the police that he ought to be locked up.

He hurried back to the hotel; ordered a carriage; paid his bill; and within a short time was speeding away to the south at twenty miles an hour.

The last he saw of the police spy that worthy stood by the door of the telegraph office, watching the departing train, and Maurice became satisfied that a full description of his personal appearance would be flashed ahead of him to every station on the road to Marseilles, whither he was bound.

On his arrival there, as he had expected, he found two gendarmes, waiting till his door was opened, and they favored him with a long scrutinizing stare as he descended from the cars and drove to his hotel.

This constant and open watching was very annoying as a matter of course; the more so that he found that his fame had preceded him, and had already spread beyond the limits of the police. The waiters of the hotel where he went treated him with an exasperatingly soothing civility and whispered to each other about him, while another police-spy followed him through the streets wherever he went, without any pretense of concealment.

This might not have been so annoying after all; but for one thing.

He had come to Marseilles to find the lady he knew as Miss Benton, and he found that his

reputation as a lunatic made the acquisition of information doubly difficult.

People would give evasive answers to his questions, smile furtively at each other, and he could hardly obtain any definite account of the people of whom he was in search.

He found out, however, that an English yacht had left the harbor the day before he arrived, and that it was supposed she would stop at Naples on her way to Alexandria, the party on board being bound for an Eastern tour.

He also ascertained that he could obtain passage in a steamer of the Messageries Maritimes to Naples that evening.

He went therefore, to the office to engage his passage; when the first person he saw there was Colonel Orville Keene, on the same errand.

Their greeting showed mutual embarrassment; for Maurice hardly knew in what light to regard Keene; and the colonel seemed to regard Maurice as thrown in his way again by a spiteful fate.

When they were walking down to the boat, however, Keene thawed out and opened a conversation.

"Dulcie," he said, "I don't know but what you may be right after all about this case and I wrong, but I can't help it. I've got to do my duty and take this man."

Maurice looked at him sharply.

"Have you changed your opinion of Spencer Vargrave then?" he asked.

"Yes. He's a bad lot. Did you see how he helped Burton to escape? There's something crooked in this case, and I'm going to the bottom of it."

"If you would work with me, instead of against me," observed Maurice quietly, "we might do a good deal. I suppose you know what happened to Mr. Peck yesterday?"

Keene, looked surprised.

"No. I've been on another tack. What has happened?"

Maurice told him the whole story, and Keene uttered an exclamation of anger.

"Why wasn't I there? The clew to the whole of this case lay in that murder. These French gendarmes are no good. I can double discount them on working up a case. But I should like to know—"

He stopped and fell into a brown study.

"Like to know what?" asked Maurice.

"How that bullet got into that man's throat? It's a puzzle to me; but I'll get to the bottom of it before I've done."

"Where are you going now?" asked Dulcie.

"To Naples. I am certain that we shall find our man where that woman is. I shall not be such a fool as I was at the races. I shall work through the consul. By-the-by, Dulcie, I want to ask you a question. Don't be afraid. I don't want you to betray your pet. But I want to know one thing. What do you think was the reason Vargrave helped his cousin to escape, when he was so hot to have him convicted seven years ago?"

"Because he was afraid of him," answered Maurice. "There can be no other reason."

"That is just what I think," replied the colonel nodding. "Conrad Burton holds the secret of that murder. Why does he not use it?"

CHAPTER XIII.

NAPLES.

THERE are few places in the world where one can pass their time away in absolute idleness so pleasantly as at Naples.

The climate is so soft as to coax every one into lazy enjoyment thereof, and the motto of the people grows from the climate, as naturally as a plant grows from a seed:

'Dolce far niente.'

"It is sweet to do nothing."

The people of Naples can do it all the time to perfection, and have been doing it ever since the destruction of Pompeii. The energetic man from the North who comes there, either goes away at once in disgust, or yields to the spell of the place and joins the rest of the world of Naples in doing nothing.

To do nothing at Naples is to lie down in the sun and sleep till one is tired of sleeping, then to sit up and look at the most glorious view in the world; yawn; eat maccaroni, and go to sleep again.

That is the way the lazzaroni do in their happy rags, with no fear of a cold winter before them and maccaroni being cheap.

To buy maccaroni, to be sure, takes money; and money cannot be procured without work, unless some one is generous enough to give it away; but the lazzaroni can work at times if they will, and they can always beg.

It does not take much to make them happy at all events.

The higher classes are as lazy as the lazzaroni; but they do their sleeping in doors, and eat ices of the peculiar kind known elsewhere as Napolitaine, after the maccaroni is eaten.

The tourists are the only busy people about, and they dash to and fro with a spasmodic activity which the natives cannot understand, and which causes them to half pity, half fear these restless foreigners, who have no idea of how to enjoy life by doing nothing.

And into the midst of this paradise of lazy

people, after the departure of the *Messageries Maritimes* steamer, were plunged Colonel Keene and Maurice Dulcie, fresh from the exciting outside world, full of eagerness on the quest in which they had at last found a common interest, to discover that the English yacht they were awaiting had not yet been seen or heard of, but that her owner had telegraphed from Marseilles by the Mediterranean cable that he was coming, after touching at Corsica.

"Then all we can do is to wait," observed Maurice, "and enjoy ourselves in the mean time as well as we can."

Colonel Keene shook his head.

"You may wait if you like," he said. "I'm one of the sort that can't be idle."

"But what can we do here?" asked the young man.

"We can find out something about Natali. You know he was a brigand, and Naples is the home of brigands."

Maurice looked round him at the peaceful sleepy city, the blue waters of the bay and the towering cone of Vesuvius with new interest.

"But there are no brigands here."

"Not in the city perhaps, at least not openly, but the mountains of the interior are full of them."

"And how are you going to work?"

"Through the police. I'm going to be regular this time."

They proceeded to the office of the American consul and the colonel exhibited his requisition, which Dulcie now saw for the first time.

It was a request to the Italian Government in the cause of the international comity which had always subsisted between the United States and Italy to assist the officers of the former power, especially Orville Keene, special detailed detective, to arrest and send back to the United States the bodies of Conrad Burton and Antonio Natali, escaped prisoners held to penal servitude in the State of New York, one of the States of the Union.

The consul noted down the names and promised his assistance, and then asked Keene:

"Who is this Antonio Natali? I have heard that name before."

"I shouldn't wonder. I believe he was once a brigand in the old kingdom of Naples."

"That's it. I thought I knew the name. The prefect of police was talking about him only the other day."

Keene looked interested.

"What did he say?"

"I hardly remember clearly. It was all about the mysterious way in which he escaped by the assistance of his friends. I tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a note to the prefect. He talks very fine English, and will tell you what you want to know. He will also be able to help you with the requisition."

To the prefect of police went Keene, and found him a tall, thin Italian of the most courtly politeness, who was profuse in promises of assistance, and perfectly willing to tell them all he knew about Natali.

"There will be, I fear, trouble in making our government give up this Natali," he said, "for the reason that we are as anxious as you to get hold of him, but for a more serious crime than that for which you hold him in your laws."

"He was committed to our prisons for burglary," observed Keene.

"So I see from the requisition; but we have been wanting the same man for ten years and more for more than one murder, if your Natali be the same as ours."

"Is there any doubt of that?"

"That depends on the description of the man. Our Natali is—let me see in the records."

He hunted up several books and finally read out the following:

"PERSONAL APPEARANCE OF ANTONIO NATALI, ALIAS PIPPO PAZZO, LEADER OF A BAND OF BRIGANDS IN THE CALABRIAN MOUNTAINS.

"Small in size, with a slender frame, but very active and sinewy. Has brown hair and gray eyes, one of them having a slight cast toward the nose. Has a pointed nose and chin with a mouth that curves slightly upward at both sides, giving an air of great cunning to the face. Has a slight limp on the left side, the consequence of a carbine shot from one of the police on the occasion of his capture and the dispersal of his band. Was concerned in the murder of Lord Foxhurst, the English lord who was held to ransom by Natali and killed in revenge for an attempt at rescue by the police. Has murdered with his own hand the following, namely: Giovanni Prati, Giuseppe Cellini, Antonio Prati, Solomon Levi, Carlo Dolci, Tomaso Seppino and Francisco Lippi, besides being an accessory to the slaughter of seventeen other persons, named below, killed by his hand."

"Captured at Monte Carlo after the murder of an American, and brought to Naples to be tried. While awaiting sentence one of his guards was found dead before his cell door, with a small bullet imbedded in the base of his brain, having entered by way of the mouth."

Maurice Dulcie uttered a cry of surprise.

"Please read that again."

The prefect did so, and added:

"No pistol was found or other weapon which could have discharged the bullet, but Antonio Natali had escaped, his door having been opened from the outside by some confederate, and he was found to have taken ship at Leghorn and gone to the United States, where all trace of him was lost."

"That is all," observed the prefect, as he shut the book. "Have you any questions to ask, gentlemen?"

Keene said nothing, but Dulcie asked:

"Was it never found out how the man who was found dead received the bullet by which he was killed?"

"Never. It remains a mystery to this day, and will so remain till Natali is recaptured."

They thanked the prefect and took their departure. When they were in the street Keene seemed to be in a decided brown study for some time, till at last he said:

"That's a queer story, Dulcie, and the queerest part of it is the way that same trick of the bullet comes across us every time."

"Well, have you found out anything?" asked Maurice presently as they walked along toward the bay, Keene giving no further evidence of intention to speak.

The colonel nodded.

"Yes. Our Natali of Sing-Sing and this other Natali are two different men."

Maurice started.

"How do you know that?"

"Different descriptions," was the terse answer of Keene.

"You don't say so. Are you sure?"

"Yes. My man was a stout, broad-shouldered fellow, with a black beard and black eyes. The real Natali is a little foxy-faced fellow—"

Maurice interrupted him.

"Foxy-faced. That is just the word that expresses it. Do you remember in the restaurant at the races a man who was watching us all? I thought he was one of your men at first; but I saw you did not know him, while Spencer Vargrave certainly did, and—"

He was growing more and more excited as he began to trace up the clues, and Keene began to catch fire also.

"Yes, I remember him. I thought he was one of your men, Dulcie, or into the gang along with Burton. I did notice the cast in his eye."

"Well, then, that man must have been the real Antonio Natali, and he has never been in prison at all."

Keene nodded.

"It looks like it. But who, then, is the other Natali?"

"That is what puzzles me," Maurice frankly confessed. "There must be some connection between them."

"Why? What makes you think so?"

"Because Burton and he escaped from Sing-Sing together; and your Natali has evidently told Burton the secret of the other Natali."

Then Maurice rapidly detailed to the colonel what he had heard of the conversation in Regent's Park between Vargrave and the pretended Italian beggar, and concluded:

"What that man whispered in Vargrave's ear was the solution of the whole mystery, and is the secret of Vargrave's fear of him. How did he gain possession of that secret? He had not seen the true Natali; but he had seen the other."

Keene nodded eagerly.

"You're right. I begin to see. Maurice, you're sharper than I thought you. We're just beginning to unravel this knot. I wish that yacht would come in."

He looked impatiently out to sea, and went on angrily:

"If we were only in some sort of a live country, I could stand it; but these lazy brutes of lazzaroni are enough to drive a man mad with their eternal lolling about in the sun, snoring like pigs."

Maurice felt a good deal of the same disgust and made a proposition.

"Why shouldn't we hire one of these little fishing boats and go outside to meet the yacht? She can't be very far off, and it will give some occupation to our minds."

But Keene shook his head.

"Don't want to occupy our minds, at least I don't. I want to keep down on the object of my search. We won't find it out at sea, and Naples won't run away from us. I'm going to take a trip to the mountains and have a look at the brigands."

Maurice looked at him amazedly.

"Are you crazy?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it. I've heard very funny stories about the police and these brigands. They understand each other just about as well as some of our New York thieves and detectives comprehend each other. There is a sort of agreement between them, just as there is in the prison between the convicts and the keepers, as I told you once before. Human nature is the same, all the world over."

"But how are you going to visit these brigands without being captured?"

"I don't expect to visit them without being captured."

"You don't?"

"No, I don't."

"Then perhaps, Colonel Keene," said the young man, a little impatiently, "you will have the goodness to explain to me what you intend to do after you are captured by the brigands."

"I intend to be ransomed out."

"Oh, I understand. You mean that the con-

sul will do it for you, as representing the Government."

"I don't mean any such thing."

"Then who will do it for you?"

"You."

"I?"

Maurice looked at the other with a mixture of amazement and anger.

"I begin to think that your ill-success in this quest is turning your brain, Colonel Keene," he said, sharply. "What call have I to ransom you out of my own pocket, if you deliberately throw yourself into the way of the brigands?"

"None whatever," was the exasperatingly cool reply of Keene, "but you'll do it for all that."

"Can you tell me why?"

"Certainly I can."

"Then why in the name of common sense—"

"Common sense has nothing to do with it, or you'd not be here, Maurice. Common sense would tell you that you are on a hopeless quest after evidence you may never get, to clear the reputation of a man for the sake of a woman who loves him, and whom you love without the slightest hope of reward."

Maurice flushed slightly.

"You said that once before. I do what I do on my own account."

"Very well. That is the reason you will ransom me if I am taken."

"Why? Why? Tell me why?"

"Because, unless I can obtain some of the secrets of the brigands, you can never find the secret you are after. We cannot find it here in Naples. The police have it not. The secret of that mysterious murder, now thrice repeated in our experience, lies among those brigands, of whose band this Natali was once a member, and of which the other Natali was once the chief. Do you begin to see yet?"

Maurice slowly bowed his head.

"I think I do," he answered. "You mean that this method of killing people so mysteriously is one employed by the brigands, kept a secret in their band, and exposed by this Natali."

"Certainly. There is, however, still one question left to solve."

"And what is that?"

"Whether this Natali did it willingly or in accordance with instructions."

"Instructions from whom?"

"From some secret society. Did you never know that Italy was the head-quarters of secret societies?"

"Have heard something of it."

"But you don't know half the truth. The Italians keep the thing up in and out of Italy. All the brigands know each other, and have secret signs and passwords which they keep sacred. The people of the country support them too, or the police would have put them down long ago. In fact, I'm not quite sure but what some of the police are into the secret societies, just as they are Nihilists in Russia."

Maurice checked him with a gesture.

"I understand what you mean. Then you think that all these three murders may have been ordered by the secret society of the brigands."

"No, I don't. I think on the contrary that the American murders of Vargrave and Peck have been done outside of the orders of the society and may lead to the detection of the means employed to kill the prison guard at the time of Pippo Pazzo's escape."

"Do you think the prefect suspects the truth, colonel?"

"I can't tell. Sometimes I think he does but that's what I'm going to find out."

"Stop," said Maurice firmly, "that is not your place, Keene. You have a duty to perform, to arrest Burton, nothing more. It's my duty, if any one's, to find out about these three murders, not yours. It is evident that they must have been committed by the same man in the same way, and it is physically impossible Conrad Burton can have been guilty of two of them he being absent, while Natali was present in two of the cases and had been watching in the third over its subsequent victim—"

"You forget," interrupted Keene. "The last persons seen with him were Vargrave and the waiter."

"I know it, but Mr. Peck had left his door open and it would have been easy for this Natali, had he been watching, as we know he was a short time before, to enter the room, perform his work, and vanish."

"Very well, but what of all that?" asked Keene impatiently.

"Simply this, that, if the clew to these murders lies among the brigands in yonder mountains I am the man to seek it, and not you."

Keene looked at him doubtfully.

"You're not the man to get the truth out of these fellows, Dulcie. Besides, who is to pay your ransom for you?"

"You are."

"Much obliged. Haven't the money."

"I have. I will leave it with you and you shall make the arrangement for me. The police must know nothing of it. If, as you think, they are in secret league with the brigands, we must blind them, and make them think it an ordinary accident. Travelers are taken every year and

held to ransom. No one knows me, but you are known well. I am only a poor young man who is making a tour of Italy on foot and have very little money to spare."

Keene slapped him on the shoulder.

"Dulcie, you're deeper than I thought you were. What a joke it will be if you really discover the mystery."

"I will either do it or get killed," said Maurice firmly.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BRIGANDS.

Two days after the conversation between Keene and Dulcie by the bay of Naples, a young man was quietly traversing a picturesque valley of the mountains, some miles from the city.

His knapsack and staff; his dusty shoes and brown blouse; showed him to be a traveler, probably not overburdened with this world's good's but in search of the picturesque on the most economical principles.

He had come to one of those lofty passes in the mountains which command a view of land and sea for vast distances, and turned to look out over the blue and glittering Mediterranean, when his eye was attracted by a distant sail, and he exclaimed aloud:

"That must be the yacht herself."

He took out his field glass and soon noted the presence of a large schooner, very different from the triangular sailed feluccas so common in that sea.

Uttering an exclamation of satisfaction, he was putting down the glass when he heard a slight cough at his elbow, and looking round, beheld a man of decidedly rough and savage appearance, staring at him as he stood leaning on the muzzle of a carbine, while the heads of several other men could be seen peeping over the rocks around him, each looking over the glittering barrel of some sort of fire weapon.

Maurice Dulcie pretended to be much surprised and alarmed, though in truth he had been expecting just such apparitions ever since he had come into the mountains.

He started back in affected alarm, and looked as if he was about to run, when the man close to him immediately cocked his carbine and called out:

"Stop-a—you—I shoot-a."

The English was quite intelligible to Maurice, if not grammatical; for the bandits of Italy are used to having English prisoners, who always pay fat ransoms, and the robbers have learned to cultivate plain English to enable them to treat directly with their victims.

The gentleman with the carbine smiled as he saw the apparent terror of Maurice, and observed affably:

"You come-a here. Ve go al capitano."

He threw his gun to his shoulder, and again Maurice had no difficulty in understanding. They were to go and see the captain.

The first brigand led the way and the others fell in behind Maurice as they passed the different rocks behind which those worthy gentry were hiding.

Then they led the young man over a rough, stony path, up and down the sides of mountains, through the beds of brooks, past the edges of deep chasms and through the bottoms of dark ravines, till they entered a wood of pine trees showing that they were on a very high level.

Maurice was careful to put on an appearance of great terror all the while, and to appeal frequently in English to his guardians to let him go, though he understood Italian perfectly and could talk it pretty fairly.

It was his cue to impress them with the fact that he was an innocent foreigner, to lull any suspicions they might have of his being a spy; and to find out all he could of the route to the outlaws' retreat.

He noted carefully in his mind every turn they took, put down landmarks in his memory, and kept repeating them to himself all the while that he was giving sport to his captors by pretending great fear that their guns might go off.

They were delighted with this, and one of them pretended to let off his gun by an accident, sending a bullet through the broad straw hat of Maurice who saw that his plan had succeeded, and became more silent, for fear another bullet might take head instead of hat.

When they had entered the wood the bandits took a zig-zag circuit on purpose to perplex Maurice, who saw through the stratagem at once, and took his bearings with more care than before.

At last they came into a deep ravine, the sides clothed with dark firs, the bed of a dry stream forming the only road; and after several turns in the narrow chasm, arrived in front of a recess in the rocks, having an open theater in front, with a black cavern at the rear.

On the open space in front of the caves burned several fires, while a number of men were lying lazily about, watching as many gaudily-clad women, who were cooking the camp dinner in huge caldrons.

Maurice looked round him with great interest. He was at last in the midst of the brigands of Italy, of whom he had heard so much.

He had seen them in pictures and on the stage, and had believed the costumes to be exaggerated, but here he saw the real thing and found no exaggeration about it.

The men really did wear the high hats with conical peaks, the gay velvet jackets and breeches, and had their legs bandaged up with sandals in the apparently silly fashion of the stage brigand, while the women flaunted about with gold rings in their ears, rich necklaces and bracelets on necks and arms, and all sorts of jewels as common as glass beads.

But before he had time to do more than cast a cursory glance at these picturesque ruffians and their women, he was taken before the chief of the band, who turned out to be the very foxy-faced man whom Maurice had seen at the Bois de Boulogne, and who regarded him with a look of great glee, saying in very good English:

"Aha, monsieur! so you, who were to find out the secrets of others, have been caught yourself, have you? I welcome you to our camp."

Maurice for a moment felt that he had made a terrible blunder. It had never entered his head that Antonio Natali had already returned to his old friends and resumed control over the band of brigands.

Then, too, the words of the chief were very far from reassuring:

"You, who were to find out the secrets of others."

Did Natali suspect his present mission? That was not probable, but he would see.

"I don't know who you are," he said, in tones of pretended terror; "I never saw you before. Please, Mr. Robber, let me go. I'm not a rich man, but you can have all the money I've got if you'll let me go."

The brigand laughed sneeringly.

"No, you've not much money yourself, but you have friends who can pay, and who will soon be here in an English yacht. We shall get them all, for we have men on their track."

Again Maurice protested:

"I don't know what you mean. You mistake me for some one else."

The brigand frowned.

"You lie. Do you mean that you do not know who I am?"

"I suppose you are the captain here," said Maurice, in the same tone of simulated fear.

"If you are, please let me go."

"And you do not know my name?" asked the other, menacingly.

"How should I know your name?"

"Well, then, I'll tell you. It is a name that I have never abandoned for fear, and that is feared throughout Italy. Did you never hear of Antonio Natali?"

"What! the great brigand, who has killed so many men?" asked Maurice.

Natali smiled.

"The patriot Natali, who has killed more men than any patriot in Italy. Natali, that is I. Now you know me, tremble."

Maurice fell on his knees, shaking all over.

"Don't you see I'm trembling? What more do you want, Natali?"

Natali smiled triumphantly, and Dulcie saw that his suspicions were lulled, if indeed he had ever entertained any of the true state of affairs. But it was evident he suspected something, and Maurice wondered what it could be, and exactly how much.

He found out in a minute after, when Natali said to him, sneeringly:

"I need not ask your name. I know it already. You are Dulcie, the man that is hunting on a false scent after a friend of mine whom I am bound to protect. You would like very much to find out the secret of two deaths. Have you found them yet?"

"No," answered Maurice, feeling that he might as well stop counterfeiting excessive terror. "You know I haven't, for I have not been able to see the man that holds the secret of both murders."

Natali laughed and then frowned.

"The man will not hold the secret long, for he has no right to it. None know that but the members of the Camorra."

"The Camorra," echoed Maurice. "What is that, signor?"

Natali smiled grimly.

"You'll find out before you are very many days older," was all the reply that he vouchsafed Maurice.

Then he spoke in Italian to some of the band, saying:

"Take him away. He will be worth a good ransom, for he has friends who are rich."

The brigands seemed to be delighted with the news, and hustled Maurice away with great glee into the cavern, which he found to extend a long way into the solid rock with frequent windings and several places where it was lighted from above and seemed to be nothing more than a deep rift in the side of the mountain.

At last they left him in a chamber of such singular shape and formation that he could not but examine it very closely as soon as he was left alone, which soon happened, his guards go-

ing away to the mouth of the cavern to dinner as he supposed.

This chamber seemed to him just like the bottom of a well, lined with smooth black stone, a side passage having been cut into it from the bowels of the earth.

It was nearly round, and as he looked up he could catch the light at the top, seemingly thousands of feet away.

Who had excavated this well and how had the side passage been cut?

It did not take him long to find out, for he remembered that the whole of the peninsula of Southern Italy was in times past volcanic, that Mount Vesuvius was only some thirty miles off from him, and that all the shore of the Bay of Naples was surrounded with extinct volcanoes of greater or less size.

He was in the heart of just such a volcano. The well in which he stood had once been full of molten lava spouting up into the air, impelled by the force of imprisoned gases, and the side passage through which he had come marked a subsequent eruption in a different direction through a thinner portion of the earth's crust after the volcano had piled above itself such a mountain of ashes and lava that it had buried its own fires and smothered them in dust.

He had nothing else to do at present but examine the locality, and he took a great interest in tracing the course of the second eruption, and wondering how long ago it had taken place.

But the most interesting personal fact to himself was that the brigands evidently regarded this natural well as a perfectly secure prison for him, for they did not come near him after they had once left him there, but returned to their dinner without.

Of course it became an object in this case to Maurice to find whether the wall of black basalt in which he had been placed was absolutely unscalable. If it were, he was at the mercy of the brigands, with or without a guard; if not, he might as well try if there were no means of getting up.

A short examination convinced him that the main artery of the old volcano was absolutely impracticable.

The sides had been protected from the elements for thousands of years, perhaps, and remained as smooth as when the sudden sinking of the lava to its new level had first polished them.

It only remained to him to explore the second track of the volcano and find if there were no means of exit that way. He knew that it was a common thing, both in living and extinct volcanoes to find traces of several exits each lower than the other, and he trusted to find such in this case.

The rifts that he had noticed going up to the sky along the cavern as he came in were thus explained to him, and with that thought he set out on his way toward the mouth of the cave, going slowly and cautiously for fear of rousing the suspicions of the brigands, but using his liberty while he had it to use.

"All volcanoes act the same way," he mused, as he went along. "First there are the central fires of the earth, where all is one mass of molten elements with a crust cooled by the atmosphere, and which we call the earth. By some chance occurs a little crack in the crust under the ocean, and water flows into the fire. It turns to steam, bursts the crack wider, and the volcano begins. Then the stream forces up the lava, the stone burns into ashes, a mountain is formed and the fires are choked up. A new outlet is found lower down, which in turn is choked up, and so on, till at last the crust settles back to its old state once more."

A very good theory of a volcano, and not much worse than those of many learned professors. At least Maurice thought so, and felt quite proud as he traced its corroboration in the black ramifications of the cavern, treading, as he did, on the floor of lava. He came to the first rift, and saw that it was much more broken than the original well. The top was more open, the elements had freer access, and the sides were deeply furrowed.

"I believe I could climb out that way on a pinch," thought Dulcie, "if I could only find a way to get on the first of those projections."

But the opening of the rift was at least a hundred feet overhead, so he was obliged to give up that idea.

He went on down the dark passage and came to a second rift. This was not an extinct crater like the first and second, but a crack in the earth that had probably been formed by a volcano.

In places it was not more than two feet wide, but it cut the mountain in two parts for all that.

"There is my way out," thought Dulcie, and even as the thought struck him he heard voices approaching.

It would never do to be found there, so he hurried back to the original well in which he had been left, and was found there sitting disconsolately on a block of lava when Antonio Natali came in to see him.

The brigand was alone, and wore a pleasant smile on his features as he said to Maurice:

"Well. And are you ready now to talk business?"

"Certainly," replied Maurice. "You mean about my ransom, I suppose."

"You are exactly right. We poor men must make our living, signor."

"So I suppose. Well."

"Well. How much money have you got with you, signor?"

Maurice emptied his pockets.

"Count for yourself."

Natali was not too proud to do this, and announced the result.

"Three Napoleons; twenty francs in silver and seventeen sous. All French money. But that is not enough to take you all over Italy, my friend. You must have more somewhere. I would not recommend you to trifle with us. We are polite to those who treat us well; but we can be very disagreeable if we choose."

And his foxy face looked dangerous as he spoke, with a sly leering cruelty that caused Maurice a thrill of horror as he reflected that he was in the power of this man for the present.

"I have, of course, a circular note," he said, "but that would be of no use to you without my signature."

Natali's eyes glittered, and he became unctuously polite again.

"Ah! a circular note. I thought so. You are a prudent man, signor, not to carry too much money about you. There are so many thieves about, you know. A circular note to a banker is so much more convenient. One has only to go to the banker and get what one requires. This note of which you speak, it is for how much, signor?"

"For a thousand dollars, American."

"Ah! yes, American. A great country, that America. I have been there, as I suppose you know, signor."

Maurice had already decided not to pretend innocence of anything before reaching Naples, so he answered:

"So I believe. You went there as a servant to a Mr. Vargrave."

Natali drew himself up.

"I was the major-domo of Mr. Vargrave for a time, signor, and afterward his trusted friend; never his servant."

"I beg your pardon. I only repeat what was told me," replied Maurice.

Natali seemed irritated and went on:

"That circular note, you will give it to me signed on some house in Naples, and a note in your own hand requesting the banker to pay the money to the bearer."

"Very good," answered Maurice quietly. "Here is the note in my knapsack. But will they let you have the money if I am not there?"

Natali laughed sneeringly.

"I will attend to that part of the business. All you have to do is to sign the note, and we will be responsible for the consequences."

Maurice opened his knapsack and took out his circular note, such as prudent travelers generally carry with them in modern times, instead of ready money. Natali pounced on it and inspected it very closely, then said suspiciously:

"How is it that this is drawn by a house in Paris, signor; Americans generally do their banking through some house in their own country."

Maurice was prepared for this question.

As a matter of fact his original letter of credit was then in Keene's hands and this one was drawn in Paris for a small part of the sum he really had with him on purpose for such an emergency.

"I spent all the money I had with me," he said, "except a thousand dollars, and I was advised to put that into a letter so as to prevent losing it. That is all I have. If you take it from me I shall have to wait in Naples till I can write home and get some more money."

Natali grinned.

"So much the better. You will have time then to reflect on what a fool you were, to come into these mountains without knowing who was there. Sign the letter and write the order to pay bearer."

Maurice obeyed, addressing the order to Colonel Orville Keene."

CHAPTER XV.

THE CAPTIVE.

As soon as the brigand chief had secured what he demanded from Dulcie he became polite and rather jovial in his demeanor.

"Come," he said, folding up the order and placing it in Maurice's pocketbook, which he transferred to his own breast. "We have done our little business with mutual satisfaction. We are far from being hogs, we patriots, as you shall see. We are not even greedy of money. You can keep the seventeen sous, signor, that were in your pockets. We are quite content with the rest."

As he spoke he composedly transferred the little store of gold and silver, which had lately been in Maurice's pocket to his own and jingled the pieces with great satisfaction.

"And now," he continued, "as you have in all probability walked a long way to-day and are hungry, suppose you come and have dinner with us. You need not hesitate; for we shall consider the dinner as already paid for."

And he slapped his pockets with a grin.

Maurice was not sorry to accept the invitation, for he felt very hungry, and he wished also to see more of the brigands.

As they passed out of the cavern, Natali observed affably:

"You are a good kind of a prisoner to have; for you give no trouble. I have once or twice had the bad fortune to find some old men who are rich and tough and who want to drive hard bargains with us poor patriots, but I have always ended by getting the best of them."

"And how?" asked Dulcie.

"By close attention to business. You would hardly believe, Mr. Dulcie, what poor business men these patriots are. See, I was away from them for a few years in the United States with my friend Vargrave and in that time the band became quite demoralized. They welcomed me back with shouts of joy when I came yesterday.

"Then you only came yesterday?"

Natali favored him with a scowl.

"You are too curious. Let me tell you that it does not do to ask too many questions about me. Yes, I came yesterday."

Maurice saw he had made a mistake, so he resumed:

"I didn't mean that. I meant to ask how you manage always to get the best of a bargain with a rich man?"

The brigand recovered his good-humor in a moment, and there was a tone of pride in his answer:

"I do it by paying strict attention to the true principle of business."

"And what is that?"

"Always to keep the advantage on your own side. That is the way to get the best of a bargain. I say to my man: 'You are worth so much. I want so much. I am reasonable and generally put it at all the ready cash he can control. He says he has not got it, and tries to get off on half. I give him two hours to think over it, and if he does not consent, I cut off one ear, and send it to his friends, with a note stating that if the money be not forthcoming, their friend would lose by installments the other ear, his nose, his toes and fingers, and finally his arms and legs. And I always keep my word."

Maurice shuddered slightly. Natali spoke with a gloating emphasis that left no doubt he was in earnest.

Presently, however, he slapped Dulcie on the shoulder with rough familiarity.

"That is our bad side," he said, "but we have a good one. Behold it!"

As he spoke, they came out of the cavern among the picturesque groups of brigands who were lounging about, smoking; while the women were nursing babies as fondly as the most respectable of people, and every one looked happy.

"See," said Natali, pausing; "a sight that is to be found nowhere out of Italy. In other countries your thieves are vulgar brutes, who rob men with bludgeons and slingshot, and spend their gains in beer and bad whisky. I have often felt a thrill of disgust in the United States to see them. Here how different? Not one of my men would be caught anywhere save in his most splendid dress, and the jewels of the travelers go to make our women splendid."

"And is that the reason they dress in that style?" asked Maurice curiously.

Natali laughed.

"They are all children, full of vanity. I was the same myself, till I had seen the world. The poor peasants can only afford one handsome suit for Sundays, because the nobles and the priests take all the rest; but we patriots can afford to dress in velvets all the year round and put the finest jewels on our wives. It costs us nothing but danger to life; and we take our lives in our hands daily."

"Then that is the reason the people do not rise on you and why the police are so slack in pursuing you?" said Maurice inquiringly.

"The people are our friends, signor, and call us what we are—patriots. We war against the tyrants that suck the blood of our country, and laugh at the police."

"But I am not sucking the blood of your country," objected Maurice, mildly.

Natali smiled good-humoredly.

"Perhaps not; but you are a foreigner, and Italians have a right to live on the rest of the world. Come; let us have some dinner. Argument will not fill the stomach."

He made Maurice sit down on a rock, and called several women to attend on him, which they did with great good humor and natural Italian courtesy; while the chief of the brigands conferred apart with one of his men, and sent him off at a run toward the city of Naples.

"Tell Gianbattista to be sure they give him good money," Maurice heard him call out as the man departed; and Dulcie rather wondered what he meant till Natali came back and observed in English:

"It is surprising what poor business men these patriots are. I had to tell that man to be sure and get good money, on account of a scurvy trick played on us by one of your compatriots a little while ago."

"And what was that?" asked Maurice.

"We had him up here—at least Giuseppe Toldo did—and he gave an order for ten thousand francs, which was paid and the man released. When our men came to present some of the bank bills afterward for payment, what do you think happened?"

"They were stopped I suppose?"

"Exactly. Was it not a scurvy trick to play on a poor patriot? Ever since that it is a rule of our band to insist on payment being made in gold."

"A very good rule," said Maurice. "I see that you are determined not to be cheated. But I wonder at one thing."

"And what is that, signor? Ask without fear except on one subject, my life outside of this band. Here I am safe, but I am not safe outside of this band."

"Very well," said Maurice, "then what I want to ask is this; how do you manage to live here within thirty miles of Naples, when it would be easy for the police to kill you all?"

Natali laughed sneeringly.

"The police dare not come here at less odds than ten to one, signor. Besides, it is not worth their while when we set aside their share out of every ransom."

"Their share!"

"Certainly. Do you know the salary of the prefect of Police?"

"No."

"At Naples he gets a thousand *scudi*, a year—about two hundred dollars of your money—and he lives handsomely, keeps three horses, and gives dinners to the consuls."

"I suppose he cannot do that on his pay."

"Assuredly not. But on the perquisites of his office he can grow rich. Oh we have to pay taxes as well as other Italians, but we get our money's worth and they do not. That's all the difference. Come you must buy some of our *lachryma Christi*. We impounded the abbot of the convent where they made it, to get that wine."

Maurice had to acknowledge, as he sipped it, that it was worth the risk; for it had a peculiarly luscious flavor, found in no other wine on earth.

"We made the monks send us half the wine they had in the convent," observed Natali, holding up the glass to the light, "and we keep it for travelers who give us as little trouble as you, signor. I drink your good health."

He smiled amiably and seemed very well satisfied with himself and his guest.

So Maurice finished his dinner and was forced to acknowledge that he was not being badly treated by any means.

When it was over, Natali said to him:

"Your ransom will probably be here tomorrow and if it is all right you shall go free. In the mean time you are free to go about among the men of our band as much as you please, but if you venture out of this clearing into the wood, or make any attempt to escape, it will go hard with you."

"I am not likely to do that now," answered Maurice calmly. "I will own I had thoughts of it before I signed the order for all my money, but now that is gone, I should be a fool to run into danger, when, as you say, I shall go free to-morrow, after my ransom is paid."

"A very sensible conclusion, signor," said the brigand approvingly. "Now I must leave you; for I have duties to attend to. We poor patriots are kept hard at work all the time, to earn an honest living."

He went away, and soon after Maurice saw him in deep consultation with some members of his band, whom he sent off through the woods, in different directions.

Inside of half an hour, the prisoner found himself left alone without any guards but the women, who paid but little attention to him.

For a few moments he was strongly tempted to make a rush and try to escape through the woods; but second thoughts told him that such an attempt would be not only dangerous but silly.

He had voluntarily come among the brigands to find out something about Antonio Natali, and the man himself had turned up, in the person of the chief of the band.

It would never do to abandon the enterprise now that there was a chance of finding out something definite.

In the midst of his band, Natali was quite open and frank, uninfluenced by fear, and given to vanity and braggadocio. Might he not play on these passions of the chief, and find out the secret in an unguarded moment of confidence?

He had already some facts to go on. There were two Natalis, and this one was still a friend of Spencer Vargrave. Who then was the other?

He had the secret of the murders, and had therefore probably at some time been a member of this band.

Was he so still, or had he turned traitor in telling the secret to Conrad Burton? Where had the brigands gone now, and what did Natali mean by saying that he would soon have all the people on the English yacht, for he had "men on their track?"

On whose track? Who were the men? How could Natali be so sure he would be able to de-

coy a rich English party into his lair up among the rocks?

These were all puzzling questions to solve; and while he was trying his wits on them the day grew on apace, and he set out to explore the cavern, this time without any fear of interruption.

He went back first to the original well of the volcano, and then examined all the rifts in the rock with special care, till he found a place where he could climb up, which he proceeded to do without being seen by any of the women, till he found himself at the edge of the rift on the mountainside, several hundred feet above the level of the cavern-floor, and commanding an extended view of land and sea.

He was above the line of fir-trees, surrounded by bare slopes of gray rock, and could see all over the foot of the mountain as far as the Bay of Naples and the smoke from the distant cone of Vesuvius.

He had brought up his field-glass with him, and trained it on spot after spot all over the landscape, finally discovering that the brigands had returned in force to the very place where they had captured him, and seemed to be lying in wait for some one there. Further down the mountain he could see a man on a mule coming slowly up the steep roads, and came to the conclusion that this was the man that they were waiting for to rob.

He watched the man come along and could see through the glass that he was dressed as an ordinary gentleman; but the distance was too great to make out his features.

There was, however, something in the figure which seemed to him familiar even at that distance, and he was puzzling his brains over what it could be when the man on the mule arrived at the summit of the pass and the brigands came out of their concealment and surrounded him.

What was his astonishment to see the man on the mule shake hands with the foremost and engage them in what seemed to be a long conversation at the end of which he turned his mule and rode back toward Naples, unmolested.

"He must be one of their spies," thought the watcher, "but what is it that is so familiar in his figure? I have surely seen it before."

He watched the man on the mule till he had disappeared behind a spur of the mountains, and then noticed that two of the brigands had left the advance posts and were coming back towards the cavern.

"Time for me to come down," said he to himself. "It will never do to be found up here."

He scrambled down the rift back to the cavern and then lounged about with an innocent air till he had made his way back to the open space among the women where he tried to make acquaintances by talking a little broken Italian to them, which they received with much good-humored laughter.

This lasted for about half an hour, when the chief of the band was to be seen coming back accompanied by a burly, broad-shouldered brigand, whom Maurice knew to be Giuseppe Toldo the former chief, just displaced in favor of Natali.

They came up to Dulcie, and Natali, for the first time in their relations, seemed to be a little embarrassed, a feeling which he tried to hide under an appearance of roughness foreign to his usual manners.

"Signor," he said to Maurice, "my man has not come back with the money for your ransom."

"Well," answered Maurice, quietly. "You did not expect him, did you, till to-morrow?"

Natali compressed his lips.

"That's not it. In the mean time the men of the band are grumbling at the liberty allowed you, and demand that you be kept close in the cavern."

"Very well," answered Maurice, as before. "I'm in your power, and you can do with me as you please, as long as you keep faith with me."

"Keep faith with you!" echoed Natali, with a snarl. "Do you doubt our honor?"

"I hope I shall not have occasion," said Maurice, coldly, "for I have always heard it said that you gentlemen had that one virtue, with all your vices."

"What does he say?" Toldo asked his comrade in Italian.

Natali repeated the substance of the words to his fellow brigand, and Maurice heard Toldo say cynically:

"You're too squeamish. Give him a taste of the stiletto if necessary. He has signed the order and the money is safe by this time."

Maurice listened anxiously for the answer and felt relieved when Natali said:

"Bad policy. It will not do. If people find ransoms will not buy safety, our business is ruined. We must keep faith for the sake of money."

"We must keep faith with others also," replied Toldo, growling. "The signor has been a good friend to us, and promises to bring a party up to us that will be worth fifty thousand scudi."

"Silence!" said Natali, uneasily. "The man may understand you."

Toldo cast a contemptuous glance on Maurice as he replied:

"Not he. We might plot his murder right under his nose and he would be never the wiser. Well, what shall we do?"

"We must do as the signor says and keep this one till we have taken all the others," answered Natali.

Maurice had sat looking at them in apparent wonderment all the time they were discussing his case, and Toldo turned to him roughly, saying:

"You come-a-ve put-a you in-a prigione—you say prisone."

He beckoned Dulcie away to the cavern and pointed inside.

"You-a go in-a—you stay—you come out-a you get shoot-a. *Intendete?*"

Maurice knew that "*Intendete*" meant "Do you understand?" so he nodded.

"I understand."

Toldo turned away and beckoned to another brigand, whom he ordered to watch the mouth of the cavern.

"If the prisoner comes out, shoot him," were the terse orders of the lieutenant of the band—a position which Toldo evidently held.

Maurice accepted his fate with the best philosophy at his command, sat down on a piece of lava and watched. As the evening drew on the brigands began to come out of the woods and the fires were freshened up while the women set about preparing supper.

The sun set, and all the men had come in, while Natali and Toldo sat apart from the rest conversing in low tones and looking as if they were discussing some project on which there was a difference of opinion.

They frequently glanced toward Maurice, and the prisoner came to the conclusion that it was his own case they were talking about.

Naturally, after what he had seen from the summit of the rift, he connected this sudden change of policy toward himself with the visit of the man on the mule.

Who was this man?

He had come straight from the city of Naples, and was a friend of the brigands, very probably their spy.

He had told them something about Maurice that had roused their suspicions, and they were discussing the question of breaking faith with and killing him as soon as the ransom should be paid.

As he thought over all this he felt a thrill of apprehension, quickly followed by one of anger and determination.

"I'll get the best of them," thought he, "if they don't kill me to-night; and I'll have my revenge for their treachery. But if I only knew who was that man on the mule, I should know better how to act."

While he was revolving these thoughts in his mind, Natali left Toldo and came toward him with affected cordiality.

"Come, signor," he said, "there is no reason why we should not be sociable for one night, even if the men do grumble and confine you to the cavern. To tell you the truth we expect a visitor to supper, and I want to give you a warning for your own safety. I want to keep faith with you myself; but I admit that it will be difficult if the new-comer denounces you. He is a member of our band who has sent us in many rich prizes and has great influence with the men. You know him too. His name is Vargrave."

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ARRIVAL.

WHEN Maurice Dulcie had halted in the pass of the Apennines just before capture and looked out to sea, it will be remembered that he saw a yacht far out, which he took for the vessel of Lord Armitage.

Another man was watching the same yacht at the same moment from the shores of the bay, and that man was Colonel Orville Keene, just as eager as Maurice.

Colonel Keene felt equally sure that the vessel in sight was the English yacht, and had made all his plans for capturing his prisoners as soon as he came to shore, on the principle that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush.

He watched the vessel as she raised her white sails plainer and plainer above the watery expanse, till her low black hull was visible, when he hastened to the prefect of police and told him of the approach of the vessel containing the fugitives from justice.

The prefect was all activity at once and furnished him with a number of *sbirri* or policemen, sufficient to overpower any possible resistance, when the colonel embarked them on a small government steamer and ran out to meet the yacht.

As he came closer to the vessel, however, she fired a saluting gun and hung out, not the English, but an American flag.

Somewhat puzzled, Keene yet ran up to the stranger; boarded her, and found himself in the presence of a stout, florid young man, with a good-humored face who saluted him in English with a cheery:

"Good-morning, sir. I hope you talk our language if you're the custom house man, be-

cause I don't talk a word of Italian. My papers are all right and we don't intend to take any thing dutiable ashore."

"I am not the custom house officer," said Keene in a vexed tone, "and I took you for some one else. Have you seen an English yacht owned by Lord Armitage on your cruise?"

The young man began to laugh.

"Seen him? I guess I have. He sailed out of Marseilles forty-eight hours ahead of me and I passed him, hull down, near Corsica. I tell you those English yachts can't sail us for a cent. May I ask who you are then, sir. My name's Fenton, and this vessel is the *Magic* at your service."

"My name is Keene," answered the other, "and I am here on duty."

Fenton repeated the name.

"Keene, Keene. I've heard that name before. Never mind now. I say, have you been long in Naples?"

"A few days."

"Do you know whether there's a fellow called Dulcie, one of us you know, here? He gave us the slip at Paris, and we heard at Marseilles that he had taken steamer for here."

"We came here on the same boat. He is a friend of mine," answered Keene.

Fenton held out his hand.

"Put her there. Any friend of Dulcie's is a friend of mine. I say where is he now, do you know?"

Keene hesitated.

"I am afraid he is in trouble."

Fenton's countenance fell immediately, and he asked in a tone of concern:

"In trouble? What? Has he got into a fight? He always was quite a fighter. I'll bail him out if that's all."

Keene smiled.

"You seem to be quite a friend of his. But no, that's not the trouble. I'm afraid that he's fallen into the hands of the brigands."

There was quite a crowd of young men on the deck of the yacht, and as soon as he mentioned the word "brigand," they all turned their heads to listen, and looked as if they were much interested. As for Fenton, he only laughed.

"Brigands! Oh, come, what are you talking about? That's all past and gone. They don't have brigands nowadays?"

Keene shook his head.

"Unfortunately they do, and I fear they have got Mr. Dulcie. He went up in the mountains alone, and it is only a week since a whole party of English travelers had to pay ten thousand dollars ransom to get out of the clutches of the same band."

Fenton turned to his lounging friends.

"Do you hear that, boys?" he cried. "Poor old Dulcie's in a scrape among the brigands. What do you say to getting him out?"

"Ay, ay!"

"Certainly."

"Count me in, Tom."

"We'll warm the old five-cent shinners."

"Dulcie's a good fellow."

"Let's get him out."

Such were samples of the exclamations that met Colonel Keene's ears as he looked round on the young men.

He saw he had come into the midst of a crowd of well-to-do, reckless young men, pining for excitement and ready for any dare-devil exploit, and an idea entered his head, which he immediately ventilated.

"If you are in earnest," he said, in a low tone, to Fenton, "I can tell you a way to astonish the natives round here, and clear out quite a little nest of thieves. I may as well tell you I am of the secret service here. Come this way, so the *sbirri* can't hear us."

He took Fenton to one side, and whispered with him long and earnestly, the face of the young man getting more and more expressive of excitement and delight, till he burst out:

"A splendid idea! They'll never think of it. How we'll astonish them! All right. I'll do my part if I can get the necessary."

Again Keene whispered to him, and again Fenton said:

"The very thing. I'll do it."

Then Keene withdrew to his own little steamer and went back to the quay, while the *Magic*, instead of continuing on her way to Naples, wore round on her heel and stood out to sea toward the long black column of smoke on the horizon that announced the coming of a steamer toward the port.

To the questions of the prefect of police who seemed to be very curious as to the cause of this sudden change, Keene replied by telling him that he had been mistaken in the vessel, and asking him if he knew what steamer that could be coming in.

"That is the boat you came by, signor, or rather the other boat of the same line. They run every three days."

Keene seemed to be full of nervous anxiety that day after he had dismissed his Italian contingent. He paced the quay nervously, and frequently ascended the watch-tower to look through a spy-glass out to sea.

He saw the little yacht pass the steamer, and the big vessel come into the bay, and finally

shut up his glass with a sigh of satisfaction, saying to himself:

"There's the other at last. I shall be able to keep faith with them all. I wonder if they've got Dulcie yet?"

He came down to the quay to find the prefect of police, looking for him with an anxious face. As soon as he appeared the Italian hurried up to him.

"Ah, signor, what a misfortune you did not tell me that your friend was going up into the mountains or I would have sent an escort to protect him. He has been taken by the band of Giuseppe Toldo, and they have sent a man here for his ransom."

Keene affected a surprise and consternation he was far from feeling and inquired:

"Can he not be rescued? Surely if you know the name of the man that heads the band and have a message from him, you can arrest the messenger and make him show you the way to the brigands' retreat."

The prefect shrugged his shoulders.

"To be sure we could; but in that case do you know what would happen?"

"You would find my friend, exterminate the band, and make the roads safe."

"We might find your friend, signor, but it would be only as a dead body. These men are not to be trifled with. They must have their money or they kill their prisoners and flee so no one can trace them. No, signor, there is no help. The ransom must be paid."

"Where is the messenger?" asked Keene.

The prefect indicated a slouching youth in the rags of a lazarene who was leaning against one of the granite posts of the quay, idly spitting in the water.

Keene went up to him.

"Where are you from?"

"Seppi Toldo, s'more," was the indifferent reply of the other looking up.

"And what do you want here?"

"Five thousand francs in gold for the life of the American, signor."

"Have you any note from him?"

The boy went down into his rags and produced a letter which read:

"DEAR KEENE,

"The patriots have got me. Please see that the bearer gets the money on my letter of credit and they promise to let me go at once." Mr. Natali sends his compliments. Yours truly,

"MAURICE DULCIE."

"I thought you said that you came from Giuseppe Toldo," observed Keene.

"Si, signor, Seppi Toldo is our captain."

"Then who is this Natali who sends me his compliments?" asked the colonel sharply.

The boy looked stupid.

"I don't know, signor."

"He doesn't want to know," thought Keene. "So Natali has got back among his old friends. This simplifies the matter."

He went to the prefect of police.

"Suppose I help this boy to get the money, how am I to be sure they'll let my friend go?"

The prefect shrugged his shoulders.

"It is all a matter of honor, signor. The men of the mountain keep their word if they accept a ransom. Consider what would happen, if they did not."

"What would happen?"

"No one would trust them and they would starve in a year if they were not hunted out before that time. As it is, people find it cheaper to pay, than to fight."

"But why don't you go up and and rout them out of their holes?" asked Keene.

"Simply because it does not pay to be too zealous in the service of the king of Italy, signor, on such pay as we get. If I am killed by a brigand, who will see to my family after I am gone?"

Keene turned impatiently away, disgusted with this specimen of Italian police.

He took the boy up to the bankers, and with a sigh of unwillingness saw him draw the money and carry away the little bag of gold toward the mountains. Then he returned to the quay, just as the passengers from the steamer were coming out of the custom-house and beheld Spencer Vargrave stepping into a carriage to go toward the hotel.

Keene fell back behind a pillar and smiled to himself as he looked at the young man.

"So, so," he muttered, "and you have come after us too, have you? Well, let us see if you will keep me from my duty another time, my friend. There may be more arrests than one before I am through with you."

He waited till the carriage was well down the street before he stepped out and then went toward the hotel, which he entered by the side door, and looked into the office before venturing further.

It was lucky he did so; for he heard the voice of Spencer Vargrave, saying:

"How long have they been here?"

"Since yesterday, signor," answered the polite landlord. "They came on the last boat before you did. Signor Dulcie went off to the hills for a ramble to-day, and has not yet come back. In fact, I fear—"

"You fear what?"

"I fear he has seen Seppi Toldo."

Keene heard Vargrave mutter something under his breath as he turned away, and the colonel quietly slipped out again, and went down to the quay.

From the top of the tower he descried the two sails for which he had been looking all day, sailing in company toward the port—the Magic, and Lord Armitage's yacht, the Enchantress.

"I wonder if those boys have done what they said they'd do," he muttered as he shut up his glass and came down the tower steps.

He watched the yachts till they were off the entrance of the bay, and then went back to the hotel, which he entered this time without any attempt at concealment.

"There is a large party of ladies which are coming up the bay on an English yacht," he told the landlord. "I fancy they have come to see Vesuvius, and enjoy themselves."

The landlord rubbed his hands and looked as pleased as landlords always do at the prospect of numerous guests, while Keene looked carelessly over the book, and saw at the bottom of the open page the name of Spencer Vargrave.

"Is this gentleman here?" he asked.

"Yes, signor, and no. He only stayed a little while, then ordered a mule for travel on the mountains, and went away. Have you heard from your friend, signor?"

"Yes. The robbers have got him."

"I feared so, signor. It is too bad. He was an amiable young man and did not look very rich. They will skin him like an eel, those fellows."

"Serves him right," said Keene with affected peevishness. "I told him not to go."

The landlord sighed.

"Ah, yes; but they will not be persuaded, these rash young Americans. They think that it is all a romance about the brigands, and they find out the reverse too late. I suppose, signor—"

He hesitated and rubbed his hands.

"You suppose what?" asked Keene, in the same peevish way.

"I suppose that the signor's friends will see that my little bill is not a total loss. The poor young gentleman went away as you may be aware intending to return, and without paying—"

"I'll pay his bill," answered Keene shortly.

"Make it up at once."

The landlord was all smiles again.

"It shall be done, signor. It is but a trifle after all. Is the signor sure that there is a large party of ladies on the English yacht?"

"Yes; I saw them through the glass, and they are pretty sure to come here. By-the-by, is it usual for travelers here to hire mules to ride on?"

"Certainly, signor, if they are going to the mountains. Travelers love their ease, and one must either walk or take a mule, for our horses are no use in the mountains."

"Where can one hire a mule?"

"We have plenty of them, signor. Do you wish to take one?"

"Yes. I am going to take a ride toward the mountains myself."

"Then I need not advise your excellency to keep a sharp look-out for Seppi Toldo and his band. Don't go too far."

"How far can one go in safety?"

"Not more than five miles in any direction, signor, except toward the volcano, where visitors are always numerous."

Colonel Keene went out of the hotel, ordered a mule, and rode off at a trot toward the mountains where it was said that Giuseppe Toldo's band were in possession.

The country did not look as if it were troubled by brigands, for the peasants were peacefully at work in the fields hoeing the maize-hills or stirring the soil round the roots of the olives and figs as if there were no such things as robbers in the universe.

As the colonel passed them they would lean on their hoes and look at him in a quizzical way, as if they wondered to see him going in that direction; but it was not till he had passed the limit of safety of which the landlord had spoken to him that any one addressed him directly.

Then as he came to one of the wayside crosses so common in Italy, an old woman sitting at its foot appealed to him for charity, and when he gave her some money, blessed him and said:

"Your excellency is a stranger here, and would do well to turn back."

"Why, mother?" asked Keene.

"Why? Holy Mother, signor, do you not know that Seppi Toldo is out with his band on the hills? There was a young man who went by here this morning in spite of all I could say to him, and they have taken him already."

"How do you know, mother?"

"Because the messenger for his ransom came by here within an hour after."

"Has the messenger come back from the city also, mother?"

"Yes, signor, and I am expecting to see a second very soon."

Keene was interested.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because another signor, a tall, dark young man, rode by a little while ago, in spite of all I

could do to stop him, and I fear he has gone also."

Keene's face lighted up at once.

"How was he dressed?" he asked, eagerly.

The old woman cogitated for a little, and then described to him pretty exactly the dress of Spencer Vargrave as he had seen him last.

Keene had found out what he wanted to know, and turned to ride back to the city at a slow pace.

"So he has gone up the mountains, too," he thought, "and the brigands have taken him prisoner. Why did he go there all alone? Have they taken him? That is the question, and one that I will find out an answer to before long."

He shook his mule's rein and trotted back to Naples, taking a road by the bay.

The English yacht had come to anchor by the mole, and the Magic was sailing out of the bay as if she had made up her mind not to land her party.

The colonel rode on to the hotel and left his mule at the stables, then entered the building to become conscious of a great racket going on inside.

He found the landlord and all the waiters looking flurried and running to and fro, while bells were ringing all over the house and gay voices up-stairs were laughing and talking at a great rate. As soon as the landlord saw him he came to him and began, with uplifted hands:

"Oh, signor, what a party! They are all like mad people, and the ladies are the worst. Are all your American ladies like these? They will drive us out of our wits."

"Why, what have they been doing?" asked Keene, smiling slightly.

"Ah, signor, do not laugh at me. It is too real, too terrible. I don't know what I shall do. They came in like a mob of wild savages, with an English milord at the head of them, all singing together, and took up all the best rooms in the house."

"But you needn't be afraid of that, as long as they pay well," observed Keene.

"It is not that, signor; but they call for such strange things and abuse the waiters and break things. Ah, they behave like a crowd of lunatics from a mad-house."

Even as he spoke came the sound of smashing glass overhead, and two of the waiters came running down-stairs frightened to death, and fled to the landlord as if for protection.

"What have they done now?" demanded the unhappy Boniface, clasping his hands.

"Oh, signor," panted the first waiter; "they called for some American drink, I know not what it is, called cobblare and we took them up what we thought they meant, when the ladies all began to scream and throw the glasses at us. We fled for our lives."

The landlord turned to Keene, desperately.

"Signor," he said, "you know the ways of these your countrymen and countrywomen. Will you not assist to interpret for me and save my property from destruction? If you do not I must turn these people from my house."

"Certainly I will," replied Keene; "let us come up-stairs."

CHAPTER XVII.

VERY STRANGE GIRLS.

FOLLOWED by the trembling landlord, who was pale as ashes and scared out of his wits, Keene walked up-stairs and entered the large saloon of the hotel from whence the noise of talking and laughing proceeded.

The doors were wide open, and he stopped to gaze on the room within, full of people with a mixture of amazement and laughter, hardly crediting his sight.

It was a curious scene.

The room were full of young women in all sorts of bizarre traveling dresses, and occupying all sorts of free and easy attitudes, with only two gentlemen present, in one of whom Keene recognized the young American Tom Fenton, his florid face convulsed with laughter as he watched the antics of his lady friends, while the other was a tall gentleman with British Dundreary whiskers, in whom Keene knew he saw Lord Armitage, who also looked very much amused at his surroundings.

Lady Armitage, whom he also knew by sight, was sitting by the window with a blonde lady, whose large gray eyes looked seriously out on the scene, and both ladies had the air of seeming a little scandalized at the proceedings of the rest.

As soon as Keene made his appearance in the doorway a hush came on the ladies. Several, who had their feet up on the backs of chairs, took them down and turned round to look at him, while Tom Fenton said reprovingly:

"Come, girls, order. A friend of mine."

He came forward politely enough and greeted Keene, whom he introduced to Lord Armitage and observed:

"Mr. Keene is a friend of a very dear friend of mine, my lord, Maurice Dulcie by name. Hope you'll like each other. Lady Armitage, Mr. Keene; Miss Benton, my friend Keene."

The colonel bowed quietly to these different introductions, and said:

"I must beg pardon for my intrusion, but

the fact is the landlord asked me to come up and intercede for him. He finds he does not understand American ways, and is fearful he will offend you, or at least these young ladies."

"There, girls, you see what you've got by your behavior," cried one strapping creature, with very profuse blonde curls falling over her eyes. "The landlord wants to turn us all out. Ain't you ashamed of yourselves, all of you? Why can't you be quiet like me?"

As if to show how quiet she could be this wild hoyden began to dance a regular break down, while the other girls broke out singing a negro melody and patting in time, to the horror of the landlord.

The noise seemed likely to grow worse than ever, when Lord Armitage quelled it as if by magic, by saying in a smooth quiet way, slightly sarcastic:

"Oh, I say, girls, you know, there is such a thing as bad form, you know. This house doesn't belong to us, you know."

The wild hoyden stopped dancing, the other girls stopped singing and patting, and they all went to the other end of the room, where they began to whisper and giggle together.

Quiet being restored, the landlord was allowed to explain that he would gladly attend to all the reasonable wants of the ladies; but that if they insisted in treating his waiters with such contumely, and on breaking things in his house, he should be obliged to request them to move elsewhere, or to claim the protection of the police.

Lord Armitage, who seemed for some reason or other to be much amused at the whole matter, promised to become responsible for any damage done, and Tom Fenton added:

"Tell the landlord that the girls are all my sisters and cousins, fresh from school on a trip round Europe, and that they are a little wild with their new freedom; that's all."

The landlord, when this remark was translated to him, observed in the driest tone—

"It was a pity the little signorinas had not been kept another year or two in school, or had worn off the freshness of their liberty before they came to his hotel to break things."

He was going away, when Fenton said:

"What's the best way to get to the crater of Vesuvius? These girls want to go there."

The landlord grinned.

"An excellent place, signor. If they go into the crater just now, they are very likely to stay there."

"Why?"

"Because, signor, the mountain has been in a state of eruption for the past ten months, and it is not safe to ascend it."

"That settles one thing, girls," cried Tom, "we can't go up Vesuvius. Landlord says it's not safe."

"Oh my, what a shame!" chorused all the girls. "There's no fun here."

Then they all took out their pocket-handkerchiefs and began to sob in loud chorus, till Lord Armitage said:

"Bad form, girls. Don't overdo it."

Then they became quiet, but not before they had become the center of a number of very observant eyes from the landing outside, where the waiters came to peep at the wonderful American ladies who behaved so strangely.

"Isn't there anything else funny round here that we can see?" queried Tom Keene, as soon as the girls were quiet.

"Nothin' but the view from the mountain passes, I believe," answered the colonel, "and that's not safe for strangers."

"Why not?" asked Tom.

"Because the neighborhood is full of the brigands, and you'd all be captured."

As soon as he had uttered the word "brigands" all the girls began to scream and ran at him and the landlord.

"Brigands! What, real ones?"

"With sugar-loaf hats?"

"And little velvet jackets?"

"And guns and things?"

"And stilettos?"

"My! won't that be fun!"

"Let's go and see them, girls!"

"Let's see the brigands!"

Such were a few of the exclamations that the astonished landlord heard, and he elevated his hands, crying:

"You are mad, ladies, mad. These are not stage brigands, but real robbers, who will hold you all to ransom."

But these wild girls, for all he could say, only screamed louder that they were determined to see the brigands; and, to the astonishment of the landlord, Colonel Keene sided with them, crying:

"Let them go. It will be a good lesson for them."

"A good lesson!" grumbled the landlord. "Yes, it will be. They won't behave in the way they are behaving now if the band of Seppi Toldo once gets hold of them. But it is impossible, signor. The police will not consent to the risk."

"We shall of course apply to the police for an escort," replied Keene after he had consulted apart with Lord Armitage and Tom Fenton. "They are bound to furnish us one if we de-

mand it, unless they wish us to think they are in league with the brigands."

The landlord grinned rather sarcastically.

"You will see, signor."

Then he went away, and as soon as he was fairly out of hearing Tom Fenton burst out laughing and said to Lord Armitage:

"I think we played that pretty well on the old man. What do you think, Lady Armitage?"

"I think that you had better keep your lady friends in a little better order if you don't want to disgrace the name of your countrywomen," replied she smiling. "I've seen some pretty wild girls in my time; but I'm afraid you're rather overshooting the mark."

"Yes," observed Miss Benton, rather severely, "I thought that pupils of mine, who had profited by my careful and conscientious instructions, would have known better than to excite the suspicions of a man who had never seen them before, by unladylike behavior. Remember that you have to keep this thing up for a day longer, if you expect to succeed in your undertaking."

Somehow this address only made the girls laugh more than ever, and Tom Fenton said:

"Please excuse them, ma'am. They're only giddy young things, and don't know any better. Some of them have only just gone into long dresses."

Miss Benton smiled at this as if she too saw something ludicrous in the situation, but became grave as she said:

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. Fenton, do be careful. Remember what hangs on our success. Go and get the matter arranged, and come back to tell us."

Thus adjured, Tom Fenton went up to Lord Armitage, who had been talking apart to Colonel Keene; and the three went down-stairs and left the hotel, going to the office of the prefect of police.

They found the polite prefect as polite as ever; but soon discovered that the news of their arrival and the mad scheme they had in contemplation had gone before them.

As soon as Lord Armitage broached the subject of an escort of police to the mountains the prefect shook his head, politely but firmly, saying:

"It is impossible, signor. It cannot be done. The lives of my men cannot be thrown away for a whim. It would be a folly, a crime."

"How many men is this Toldo supposed to have in his band?" asked the English lord quietly. "That's the question."

"No one knows, signor. He has always had enough to defy the police."

"How many men have you then?" asked Keene interrupting.

"I have seventy-five men available for work outside of the city, signor."

"Very well," said Lord Armitage promptly. "Turn them all out for escort to us. I am determined to test the value of your men this time, and whether your Government can protect travelers or is going to let the brigands control all of Italy instead. If you don't choose to send the escort with us, I shall write to our minister at Rome, and ask for the appointment of a man who will undertake to protect travelers."

"And I shall write to the American minister," added Tom Fenton.

Colonel Keene said nothing.

The prefect looked agitated and distressed.

"But you do not know the danger, signor," he urged. "These brigands are cruel and merciless beyond belief."

"So much the more reason they should be exterminated," said Lord Armitage firmly. "If we are willing to take the risk with a party of young ladies, you ought to be willing to risk the lives of your men who are paid to put down brigands."

"Paid!" echoed the prefect ruefully. "Say starved rather, signor. You cannot get men to expose their lives freely for a pittance that barely buys them a little maccaroni."

The three gentlemen turned to go, Lord Armitage observing coldly:

"Very well then, I'll write to our minister that the prefect of police at Naples was asked and refused protection to English travelers from a pitiful band of thieves."

"No, no, signor, do not write that," cried the prefect in despair. "I will do what you ask. You shall have the escort; but it is on your own responsibility; and if it results in harm to the ladies and yourself, I am not to blame. You will find out that these men are not to be trifled with."

"Be it so," observed Lord Armitage. "We will start from here to-morrow at the rising of the sun. If your men are here, very well. If not, we shall go without them, and I warn you that if my party be taken, the Italian government will have to pay our ransoms."

The prefect looked dismayed, but said:

"Very well, signor. What will be, will be. But do not say I did not warn you. Oh my poor men! Who will support their poor orphan families?"

He seemed affected almost to tears, and as they went out, Lord Armitage observed to Fenton, rather gravely;

"It's hard lines on those poor devils of Italians, and if I hadn't given my word to you and the ladies to carry this thing out, I should feel inclined to give it up."

"Don't be too sensitive, my lord," said Keene dryly. "If you watch closely to-day, you may see something that will open your eyes to the real reason of the prefect's unwillingness to furnish the escort."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the Englishman, puzzled.

"I mean that a message will pass from him to the brigands, and that either we shall not be attacked at all, or there will be a sham skirmish between the brigands and the escort, under cover of which we shall be driven back and not allowed to go closer to the hills than a few miles out of Naples."

"Do you really think so?" asked Lord Armitage. "If I thought there was any collusion between them, I'd defeat the scheme at any hazard."

"All you have to do is to take a walk or ride toward the mountains, till you come to a stone cross that marks the limit of safety for travelers. If some one does not pass toward the mountains and return to the prefect's office, I shall be much mistaken."

"By Jove I'll do it," replied the Englishman, and he was as good as his word, for he rode out of the city a little while after and did not return till near sunset, when he came into the hotel and met Keene, who was waiting for him.

"Well?" said the latter, interrogatively.

"Well, you were right," answered the Briton shortly.

"What did you see?" asked Keene.

"By Jove, sir, a gendarme in full uniform rode out to the mountains, staid there an hour or more, and then came back, and I followed him to the prefect's office. There must be some understanding between them of some kind."

"We'll see what it is to-morrow," quoth Keene, grimly. "In the mean time, my lord, it's time we were making our own preparations. I've ordered carriages for the whole party, without drivers. You know our American ladies are supposed to be all good drivers, and we cannot trust these Italians. They might upset us all."

Lord Armitage smiled.

"Very true. Do you want any of my men from the yacht for escort?"

"No, my lord," replied Keene dryly. "I have consulted with the ladies, and we are to be the only men in the party, but every young lady will be attended by her maid, petticoats and all."

Something in the remark seemed to be funny; for Lord Armitage smiled as if he were much amused, and soon after the whole party of Americans and English went down to dinner at the table d'hôte, where they attracted much curious observation.

The story of the wild American savages who were going to brave Giuseppe Toldo's band, just for the fun of the thing, and relying on a police escort, had spread all over Naples; and the Italians seemed to think that the best of the joke lay in their trusting to the protection of the police.

They watched the young ladies, of whom they had heard such strange stories, with much interest at the table, but were rather disappointed to find them as modest as any ordinary girls, and unusually silent.

In fact, not one of the girls opened her lips during dinner time except to eat and drink; and it was only when they left the table in a body to go up-stairs that the Italians noticed any thing peculiar about them.

"Heavens!" observed Count Questa to the Marquis of Bellini; "are those the American beauties of whom we hear such stories? They have feet like so many fishermen, and walk as awkwardly as infantry soldiers. The brigands will not be tempted to carry them off for brides."

"They say that these American girls are cultivating their muscular powers of late," returned Bellini, "and probably that is why these girls look so coarse. I hear they are fresh from a school in America."

"That accounts for it then," remarked Questa philosophically. "Fancy making love to one of those creatures."

The bare thought made him shudder.

That evening there was quite a commotion in front of the hotel, when the American ladies came out, all together, for a promenade, going in couples, arm in arm, after the fashion of certain boarding schools.

At the head of the procession marched Lord Armitage with an undeniably handsome lady, followed by Colonel Keene and Lady Armitage, while Tom Fenton seemed to be acting as a sort of amateur policeman to keep those troublesome girls in order, for he kept vibrating up and down the long line, while much whispering and giggling went on.

The sight gathered a crowd which followed them down to the mole, where the whole party embarked in boats and were rowed out to the yacht *Enchantress*, which lay out in the bay, beside another vessel of similarly graceful ap-

pearance, from whose peak floated the stars and stripes.

It was nearly ten o'clock when they came back to the hotel, and then it was found that Lady Armitage had remained on board her yacht while the other lady, about whom it was already rumored that she was an American actress, came back.

The crowd had melted away in the lack of subjects for staring; and the streets were nearly deserted as they marched back to the hotel, in the same boarding-school style in which they had left it.

At the door they were met by a tall young man, who stepped to one side with an air of much astonishment as the strange bevy of girls entered, and stood staring at them as they went up-stairs.

Tom Fenton, who brought up the rear with Colonel Keene, uttered a cry of surprise as he saw the tall young man.

"Why, Vargrave, what are you doing here? I thought you were in Paris."

Spencer Vargrave seemed as much surprised and much more disagreeably so, for he turned red, stammered and looked confused, as he said:

"I—I thought I'd take a run over here. But what are you doing here?"

Tom Fenton was about to answer when he felt some one pinch his arm, and Colonel Keene brushed past him and addressed himself to Spencer sternly.

"So, sir, you are here," he said. "I hope you will be able to save your relative again, for I can assure you that this time I shall arrest him in a way that you cannot break. Your conduct at Paris was that of a scoundrel—do you hear, sir?"

Tom Fenton looked with amazement on the colonel usually so frigid and calm. His face seemed to be convulsed with passion and he shook his fist in Vargrave's face in a manner as insulting as it was possible to make it.

But if he was surprised at Keene's violence, he was still more so at the behavior of the usually bullying and overbearing Vargrave. That gentleman shrunk back before the menacing attitude of a man at least thirty pounds lighter than himself, and stammering: "I'll send a friend to you in the morning," fairly turned tail and fled up-stairs to his rooms, while Keene turned to Fenton with a low laugh and said:

"I knew I'd scare him. Now mark my words. We've got to keep that fellow with us to-morrow, or he'll blow the whole scheme. Oh, if I could only see a way to keep him!"

"Let me perform that office," said a soft voice beside him, and he saw Miss Benton.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TRAPPED.

SPENCER VARGRAVE hurried up to his room after his brief collision with Colonel Keene, locked the door, and sat down trembling on a chair.

There seemed to be something on his mind which had thoroughly demoralized him, for he sat gazing blankly at the wall as if overwhelmed.

"Who would have thought it?" he muttered. "It can't be done while they're all here, and that's what made that infernal detective so cheeky. It'll be blown, sure. I must get out of this and warn Natali. They're putting up a job on him."

He started up and paced the room for several minutes, and at last muttered:

"I must do it, and do it quick, or it will be too late."

What he was going to do is uncertain, for at that moment came a tap at the door, making him start like a guilty thing, and ask hurriedly:

"Who's there?"

The voice of a waiter answered in Italian: "It is Carlo, signor. A billet for the signor."

He went to the door, and Carlo handed him a tiny three-cornered note.

"Who is it from?" he asked suspiciously: "From a lady, signor, who awaits you."

"A lady!"

He opened the note and read:

"If the American gentleman will come to see me, he will hear something of the machinations of his enemies, and be able to defeat them with ease."

There was no signature to the letter, and he asked Carlo uneasily:

"Where is the lady that gave you this?"

"Waiting in a carriage, signor," was the reply of the Italian, with an air of mystery, as one scenting and delighting in an intrigue.

Spencer Vargrave hesitated.

He was a man who was dissipated to the core of his heart, and the invitation had in it the elements of an adventure such as he delighted in. At the same time there was something in it which aroused his distrust, and he finally said:

"I've no time for such fooleries. Tell the lady I'm engaged. I can't see her."

Carlo shrugged his shoulders.

"As the signor pleases. At the same time, the lady is beautiful as an angel. I saw her face for a moment."

He closed with another shrug, and was going away, when Vargrave muttered:

"No, confound it, I'll see her."

Then he called out:

"Here, Carlo, I'll go. Tell me, when did that crowd of women come here?"

Carlo grinned.

"The American signorinas? To-day about noon. Ah, signor, they are like madwomen, and nothing will satisfy them but paying a visit to Seppi Toldo. He will take the fun out of them before to-morrow night."

Vargrave listened frowningly.

"And you say they are going to the hills to defy Toldo's band?"

"Yes, signor. The police are to escort them."

And Carlo laughed as if that were the best joke of all.

Vargrave stood for a moment in a state of frowning meditation, and then observed:

"I'll see the lady and find out what all this means."

He went out to the door of the hotel, and found a closed carriage waiting. He went up to it, and a lady put out her hand and beckoned to him silently.

The lady was veiled, and the carriage door was standing open, but still he hesitated to obey the obvious invitation.

As for Carlo, he had discreetly vanished, and Vargrave was alone with the lady in the carriage and the driver on the box, who looked back as if he were impatient to drive off, and wished the gentleman would enter the carriage.

"What do you want of me?" asked Vargrave.

The lady beckoned again and pointed to a seat in the carriage.

"But can't you speak?" urged the young man. "I don't know but what this may be a trap of some sort."

The lady shook her head and pointed again to the seat.

Vargrave yielded so far as to put his foot on the step and look into the carriage.

The lady was alone.

She put out her hand and drew him in with a certain gentle persuasiveness that he found it difficult to resist, and before he realized where he was, he had taken a seat opposite to her.

Then she closed the door of the carriage, which at once started off, as if the driver had his instructions, toward the mole which stretches into the bay.

Vargrave broke the silence first:

"Now we are alone, madam," he said, "I suppose you have no objection to telling me who you are, and what you wish to do with me?"

For answer the lady threw back her veil, disclosing the face of Beatrice Benton, and it was her voice, with its deep, rich tones, which thrilled Vargrave as she said, meaningly:

"Who I am you may see. What I am about to do with you, you can guess."

Spencer Vargrave seemed to be as much astonished at the sight of the lady as he had been at that of Fenton, for he faltered and stammered in his reply:

"I—I did not know you were here. I—I thought—"

"You thought I had given up the attempt of my life at last as hopeless, satisfied he was safe. You see you were wrong. I shall never give up till I have accomplished what I set out to do."

He tried to sneer.

"You are no nearer now than you were seven years ago. Besides, what have you got to complain of? Conrad is not in prison. He is living in comfort and—"

"Dishonor!" she interrupted. "You know it—you, who should have the dishonor; you, who live on the fruits of it."

"I had nothing to do with the death of the old man," he said, suddenly. "I was on the sea when he was murdered, and you know it."

"I know it. You took your measures well, but not so well but that one way of discovery remained. I have found out that way, and by to-morrow all the world will know the secret of two deaths to which you were privy."

He affected to laugh at her.

"That is impossible. If you know anything, you know that the secret cannot be told to any one save at the risk of death to the revealer. If he has told you he has forfeited his life to an order that never forgives treason."

"Are you sure it never forgives?" she asked, in a meaning tone.

He seemed to be struck by something in her manner, if not her words.

"What do you mean by asking?" he said.

"I want to know if the Camorra—"

"Who is talking of the Camorra?" he asked, hastily. "I said nothing of it."

"But I did. I am talking of the Camorra that secret society to which so many men and women, too, belong, here in Naples. I ask you if the Camorra sanctions the use of their society for the private ends of its members apart from its objects?"

Her question seemed to touch him in a tender place, for he retorted:

"I don't know what you're talking about and I don't care. Is that all you had to say to me? If it is, I'll bid you good-bye."

He was going to put his hand on the door of the carriage, when the lady suddenly pulled the check-string and the vehicle stopped out on the mole.

"You wish to get out," she said. "Very well, you can do so. But I give you a last chance. Draw up a written confession of the way in which your father met his end, and you shall not be molested. I will see that you retain your fortune. I only wish to save the name of one who is dear to me from disgrace. Refuse, and you will find it too late."

He laughed sneeringly and opened the door.

"You must take me for a fool," was all he said, and as he spoke he got out of the carriage to find himself in the presence of half a dozen men in the uniform of yachting sailors, who made a line between him and the shore end of the mole, and looked at him sternly.

Beatrice Benton leaned out of the carriage.

"For the last time," she said, "will you right your cousin?"

"No!" he snarled. "Get out of the way, you men. What do you mean?"

He put his hand to his hip pocket and tried to draw a pistol, when in a moment the men in blue pounced on him in a way that showed them to be experts in the art, and had him pinned and gagged before he could do more than utter a single cry for help.

The lady in the carriage looked quietly on at the desperate struggle till Spencer was panting helpless in his bonds.

Then she said quietly:

"Take him aboard. We shall not want him till to-morrow. Are you all ready for your work in the morning?"

One of the men touched his hat.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, hesitatingly; "but if you please, ma'am—"

"Well, what is it?"

"Please, ma'am, the boys don't like the idea of losin' their mustashes for a spree that only lasts a day."

"Oh, nonsense," she answered, sharply. "I told you that you'd be well paid for it and get a day's liberty ashore."

"Couldn't we get a week, ma'am, if we was very good?" pleaded the sailor.

"I'll see you do, at the next port, not this. Will that do, Robins?"

Robins touched his hat. In his short, broad figure it was easy to recognize the ex-keeper at Sing-Sing.

"Whatever you say's all right, ma'am," he replied. "Come, boys, heave that feller aboard."

The carriage drove away to the hotel and the lady got out.

As she descended she said to the driver in a low voice:

"Take care of yourself to-morrow, for my sake. Keene has sharp eyes."

He nodded from his perch.

"I will be careful. There is only one danger that I see."

"And what is that?"

"That Natali may let us pass scot free. If he does the work must be done over again."

He drove away and the lady went into the hotel and retired to her own room, while quietly brooded over Naples.

This quiet was disturbed next morning by a regular concourse of carriages outside the hotel, come to take the celebrated crowd of "wild American female savages," as the Neapolitans styled them to the mountains.

They came crowding out of the hotel in all sorts of bizarre costumes, singing and screaming to each other, and to make the noise worse, a number of girls still coarser in appearance came up from the yachts in the harbor to officiate, as Colonel Keene kindly explained to the astonished Marquis of Bellini, as ladies' maids.

"For all these young ladies, marquis, wild as they seem, belong to our first families, and have been used to being waited on from their earliest years."

The marquis looked politely amazed, but only shrugged his shoulders, remarking:

"There is no accounting for tastes, and your America must be a very wonderful place. Are all your ladies' maids as masculine in appearance as these? There is one girl who must be nearly six feet high."

"She comes from Kentucky," said Keene, promptly. "The women there are all tall."

Then he advanced to help Miss Benton to her seat in an open phaeton, and within a few minutes after the whole procession drove off in eight carriages, packed outside and in with girls, who sung in the harshest of voices, blew tin whistles and generally behaved in the most lunatic fashion, all but Miss Benton, who seemed to be very pale and anxious.

Lord Armitage and Colonel Keene sat on the box of the leading carriage, and Keene said as they drove out:

"You see, the escort is not here. I thought they would fail us in some way. Probably they intend to come up too late, after we are all captured, and excuse themselves by a skirmish."

"So much the better," answered the Englishman, calmly. "But I say, Keene."

"What is it?"

"I wish Miss Benton hadn't insisted on being one of the party. I don't half like the idea."

Keene shrugged his shoulders.

"She would come. I don't ask questions, but I keep my eyes open for all that, my lord."

However this adventure turns out, there is one in this crowd that I want at the close of it all."

Lord Armitage frowned slightly, and touched up his horses, saying:

"Keep it to yourself, then. I don't want to know anything about it. I don't know half the men on board my yacht. I give you my word of that. I leave it all to my sailing-master."

Keene made no further remark on the subject, and they drove on out of the city and along the country roads till they came to the wayside cross, where Keene had seen the old beggar-woman the day before.

She seemed to be a regular frequenter of the place, for as they drove up there she sat with her hand outstretched as usual.

They drew up, and Keene descended.

"Has any one passed this way yet?" he asked, dropping a piece of silver in the old woman's palm as he spoke.

She looked at the coin and then up at him with a sly expression of malice.

"You think you can depend on the police," she said. "The prefect himself is up with the brigands now to warn them to flee."

"Do you think they'll flee?"

"What will be, will be, signor," was the only answer she vouchsafed. "I have to live here, and I dare not tell all I see."

Keene looked back along the road and saw no sign of the promised escort. The old woman noted the glance and laughed.

"You may look for a long time, but you will not see the *sbirri* till all is over. If Seppi Toldo has made up his mind to remain where he is, they will not come."

Keene's eyes lighted up as he asked:

"Are you sure of that?"

The old woman drew back instantly.

"What will be, will be. I have said nothing. The signor will remember that. My advice is to turn back."

Keene dropped another piece of silver to the aged mendicant.

"We will come back after we have seen Seppi Toldo."

"You may see more than him. Natali is back, and Natali is worth Toldo ten times over!"

"What will be, will be," retorted he, gayly. "Good-by, mother."

He climbed up on the box and said to Lord Armitage:

"They'll fight. The prefect is with them."

Lord Armitage looked amazed.

"What does that mean?"

"We shall see further on."

They drove on till they came to a steep ascent of the mountain passes, when they saw a man on horseback coming slowly down to meet them, the sun shining on his green and red uniform.

It was the prefect of police.

As he drew near he hailed them in a tone of warning:

"Go no further till the escort comes. I have been reconnoitering ahead of you, and the brigands are waiting to take you all."

"Why did they let you pass?" asked Keene, in a scornful way. "Come, I don't believe there are any brigands here. It's all a trick to frighten travelers."

They drove on regardless of the entreaties of the prefect, who rode with them a little distance, and finally turned and galloped off, shouting:

"If you will be captured, go. I have told you of your danger. They will kill you all and the escort will be too late to save you."

Keene looked back after him.

From the height at which they now were they could see all of the road to Naples and a cloud of dust was slowly moving toward them several miles off, through which the gleam of weapons showed the presence of the escort of gendarmes or *sbirri*.

"Better late than never," observed Armitage, quietly. "Now, Keene, if your plan only holds good, we're all right."

"We shall see," observed Keene, rather in a grim way, and as he spoke he felt in the pocket of the loose sack-coat he wore.

Then the carriages slowly toiled up the ascent, till they came to an open plateau at the summit of the pass, where the horses were halted to recover breath, and a silence fell over the whole of the formerly gay party. The girls, who had been screaming and laughing in the streets of Naples were now quite quiet, and might be observed casting apprehensive glances round the lonely plateau and the grim rocks above, while they kept nervously settling their garments and fidgeting about.

When the horses had dried the sweat and recovered their wind Keene saw that the escort had attained the foot of the ascent about two miles off, and he said aloud.

"Now, girls, the time's coming. Remember what I told you. Keep it up till I give the signal. These Italians don't understand California tricks. Forward, Lord Armitage."

Lord Armitage shook his reins and the little procession trotted across the plateau till they were near a descent on the other side, when out from behind the rocks came running a crowd of unmistakable brigands, carbines in hand, and in a trice had the carriages surrounded, while the leader shouted over his leveled carbine:

"You-a stop-a! We show you vat de mans of Seppi Toldo is. Stop-a!"

Lord Armitage drew up his team with commendable alacrity, and the girls that loaded the other carriages sent up a chorus of screams and shrunk down in their seats as if overcome with fear.

Then the brigands came and made a circle round the carriages, and a short, foxy-faced man advanced and said in good English:

"I must trouble all to descend. I hear you wish to see the band of Seppi Toldo. It is here at your service, and I am Antonio Natali, the business agent of the band. You will get out of your carriages at once."

Lord Armitage looked inquiringly at Keene, who nodded and called out:

"Get out all of you, girls. Resistance is useless till the escort comes up. Till then submit in silence to everything."

Natali nodded approvingly.

"Very good advice, signor. I see you are a philosopher like the gentleman we took yesterday. He has paid his ransom and is now free to go. He can arrange for the rest of you. Come forward, Mr. Dulcie."

To Keene's secret astonishment, for he had not expected it; Maurice Dulcie came out from behind a rock and advanced toward them.

"Tell these ladies, Mr. Dulcie," proceeded the brigand, "that they have nothing to fear if their ransoms are paid. My men shall not even touch them if they will empty their pockets."

"Will you promise that?" cried Keene eagerly. "I want to protect these ladies from insult if I can, you understand."

"But certainly," replied Natali. "Fall back men, and let the ladies get out. All on one side, if you please, and keep together."

"Get out, girls," cried Keene, and the doors of the carriages flew open, while the girls got out and huddled together in a dense group, like a flock of sheep, at a little distance from the carriages.

And then when the brigands were laughing together over the ease with which they had captured such a booty—

Then—

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SURPRISE.

In one moment the whole character of the scene changed.

Colonel Keene and Lord Armitage, who had had their hands in their pockets, suddenly whipped them out, a revolver in each hand; and the supposed girls as suddenly dropped their feminine toggery on the ground and ran out into a circle, in the midst of which stood the single woman of the party, now revealed, namely Miss Benton, supported by a tall, fine looking young man, whose close shaven face and short curly hair proclaimed, to the amazed Maurice Dulcie, Conrad the Convict, *in propria persona*.

And instead of a group of trembling girls, the brigands saw before them between twenty and thirty determined young men, some of them Tom Fenton's friends, others sailors from the two yachts, and every man armed with a pair of large revolvers of the latest pattern, with which they opened fire on the now appalled and demoralized brigands, with a suddenness and fury that left no doubt of the result.

The surprise had been so well and skillfully managed, that the two parties were not ten feet apart when the Americans made their rush, and in less than two minutes of a confused struggle, the brigands were worsted by the hail of bullets at such close quarters, and fled in dismay in all directions—what were left of them—while the ground was covered with wounded men and Antonio Natali was safe in the grasp of a short stout man, who had pinioned and tripped him up and was now kneeling on his stomach, coolly snapping a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of the baffled and humiliated brigand, who lay trembling and utterly cowed.

Not that the Americans had escaped altogether scathless in the fight, for the brigands had fought with the fury of despair for about half a minute.

Over a dozen had been wounded, more or less seriously; and one man lay on the ground with a bullet through his heart. But the disproportion of casualties was a sufficient proof of the difference between twelve shots per man and one, for ten brigands had been killed and only five of their men had escaped unwounded.

Colonel Keene blew the smoke from his revolver and coolly reloaded it.

Then he walked up to the tall young man who had been supporting Miss Benton, and said to him quietly:

"Conrad Burton, I've got to do my duty. I arrest you as a fugitive convict."

Conrad Burton looked down at him, for he was a much taller man, and replied calmly:

"I recognize your right and I give you my word not to escape. You never could have taken me had I not been willing."

Keene eyed him with a certain degree of admiration and respect as he responded:

"I accept your promise, the more so that I have reason to believe you will not have to serve out your term."

Miss Benton was the only person who had

heard them, and she had turned very pale when Keene came up.

As she heard the colonel's last words she clasped her hands and said imploringly:

"Oh, sir, you are not jesting? Do you really mean what you say?"

Keene looked at her gravely.

"I think so. I hope so. I have my duty as an officer to perform, but it does not give me pleasure, I assure you. I hope that this day's work will be the means of clearing up a mystery that has baffled me for a long time. Its solution lies in the hands of a man who is now a prisoner in our hands."

Conrad Burton shook his head.

"You mean Natali. He will never tell it. He dare not."

"But you know it," quickly interrupted Keene. "You know it and have known it since the day you escaped."

Burton shook his head again.

"I say nothing. I am no more at liberty to reveal the secret than he. You must find it out for yourself, Keene."

Keene looked vexed and said sharply:

"If your Quixotic notions of honor to thieves lead you back to Sing-Sing for life, it is not my fault. I've tried all I can to prove your innocence even while I have been doing my duty in hunting for you. If you choose to keep your mouth shut when you might save yourself by opening it, take your own course. I give up the case."

He turned around and walked away to where Maurice Dulcie, who had received a slight bullet wound in the encounter, stood tying a handkerchief around his arm, and said to him crossly:

"Well, you've had your adventure, and it has cost you a thousand dollars. Are you any nearer the truth than you were before you came to the mountains?"

Maurice held out his arm.

"Tie that knot tight, and I'll tell you."

There was a certain look of quiet but triumphant satisfaction in his face that made Keene hurry up the tying of the bandage, saying in an undertone:

"Tell us all about it. How did those men get killed? Do you know?"

"I think I do."

"You only think it?" said Keene, disappointed.

"Yes, I only think it, but I've pretty good grounds for thinking it. You shall see after awhile. I see you have arrested Burton. Will you keep him?"

Keene smiled significantly.

"I'm not apt to let a man go after I get hold of him. I know how he came there, or at least, I guess it; but one thing puzzles me yet, I'll admit."

"And what is that?"

"How Lord and Lady Armitage came to be mixed up with this Conrad Burton. He came on their yacht as a sailor, and they must know him. Ah, here come the police at last."

He broke off as he spoke just as the mounted police, headed by the prefect in full uniform, rode on the plateau and came up with drawn sabers and a huge clatter of accoutrements.

The prefect seemed to be transformed into a being of the most sanguinary and eager instincts as soon as he found that the dangerous part of the work was over. He rode up, asked questions, and sent out his men in all directions to chase the remnant of the fleeing brigands, with orders to show no mercy, but to kill every armed man they saw if he did not surrender at once. He did not go out with these parties in his own proper person, however, for as he truly remarked, that was the business of his lieutenant, but he made amends for it by taking charge of the wounded prisoners and bundling them into the carriages lately occupied by the Americans.

Before the little procession started out on its return to Naples, Keene went over the ground to look at the dead bodies. Only one of the sailors had been killed, and as Keene looked closely at the body he uttered a slight cry of surprise and called to Maurice Dulcie, who was near.

"Dulcie," he said, "come here."

Then he pointed down to the body, which was that of a tall dark man of powerful build, saying softly:

"Do you know who that is?"

"No. How should I?"

"That is the convict that escaped from the prison with Burton the day you were there and whom we called Antonio Natali on the prison books. He was not drowned after all. I tell you what it is; this is getting more and more interesting. I wish that Burton would speak. He could save us all a heap of trouble."

Maurice smiled knowingly.

"I wonder whether we couldn't do without him, you and I."

Keene sighed as he answered:

"I don't know. I used to pride myself on my detective abilities; but they don't seem to serve me in this case. I've got my man and I'll take him back to prison, but at the same time I begin to doubt whether he ought to go back there."

"Why not?" asked Maurice sarcastically.

"He was condemned as I have been told, time and time again, by a jury; and that settles his guilt, doesn't it?"

Keene shrugged his shoulders.

"That's all very pretty; but you don't believe it any more than I do. The fact is you don't believe Conrad Burton murdered his grandfather neither do I, and I feel strongly tempted to do one of two things."

"What are those?"

"Either to let him escape and so forfeit my whole character and past life, or to keep him till I see that he needn't go back to prison on account of his innocence being clearly proven."

Maurice Dulcie did not answer him in a direct manner. He simply observed:

"We'd better go on with the rest or we shall be left behind; and I don't believe that all the brigands in this place are dead yet."

They traveled along after the carriages, the sailors and young men now being on foot on account of the carriages in which they had come being full of wounded, and soon overtook Conrad Burton who was lagging in the rear of the procession with the evident wish to be overtaken.

When they came up to him the young man raised his hat and said:

"Colonel Keene I see you have with you a person to whom I am indebted for much kindness in intention. Will you be kind enough to introduce me?"

Keene rather awkwardly did the honors, and the escaped convict said with a smile:

"I should like to ask you a question or two."

Maurice Dulcie looked at him in a singular way. He seemed to be struggling with some inward feeling of dislike as he answered coldly:

"As you please, sir. You have a right to ask; for you at least have never deceived me, so far as I am aware."

Burton looked surprised.

"Has any one in my interest deceived you?" he asked. "You seem to imply it."

Maurice turned away his head.

"Ask your questions, sir," he said, "but do not touch on my interests. On your own you have a right to speak."

"I should like to ask, then, in the name of a lady who is very dear to me, if you have made any discoveries in the quest on which you promised her to enter."

Maurice looked at him with glowing eyes as he answered sharply:

"Yes, I have. You might have spared me a good deal of danger and expense had you been willing to aid me; but when I met you in London, you failed to trust me."

"My dear sir," answered Burton gently, "I did not know you then. I had not seen my—the lady I spoke of; and she had not informed me of your generous efforts in my behalf."

Maurice shrugged his shoulders.

"Let it pass. I have answered. I have made such discoveries at last. I have found out how Mr. Vargrave was killed."

A smile of intense joy filled the face of Conrad Burton, but then it changed to an anxious look as he asked:

"Did you obtain the secret under oath as I did, or are you at liberty to—?"

"I found it out for myself and I have the proof in my pocket," answered Maurice shortly.

"You need have no fears but that your innocence will be proven, and then you and she can laugh at the fool who pulled your chestnuts out of the fire."

Burton looked at him in a puzzled sort of way as if at a loss to understand the evident ill-humor of the young man and then answered as gently as before:

"I think you are hardly just. No one could laugh at you for what you have done for me, least of all I who benefit from the result of your efforts. But I fear you are laboring under a mistake—"

"There could be no mistake," said Maurice, in a low bitter tone. "A woman reveals herself as she is in moments of danger. Let it pass. I will wait on the lady in the evening and lay my proofs before her, if she do not object to receiving me, now that my work is over."

"I will tell her," replied Burton gravely; "and in the mean time will not force on you a presence that is evidently disagreeable."

He raised his hat and passed on among the rest; and Colonel Keene who had been watching the two sharply, turned to Maurice.

"You're deeper than I thought," he said, frankly. "Here you are—a greenhorn—and you've found out what baffled me, an old hand. How did you do it?"

"By an accident turned to account. Do you know who had supper with the chief of the band last night?"

"Spencer Vargrave, I suppose. I traced him up to the mountains but he came back."

"You are right. He was there and he gave orders that I was to be killed on my way to Naples after my ransom had been paid. The proposition was put to vote in the band. They discussed it before me with the more freedom that they thought I did not understand a word of Italian."

"And how did it end?"

"The vote was against the killing, but it was agreed that if Vargrave could get me into their

hands a second time I should not be held to ransom, and that if he wanted to take the risk on himself he might waylay me anywhere in the town limits beyond the stone cross."

"Hem! By-the-by, I wonder what's become of that fellow. He nearly spoiled all our little game last night. He came back just as I brought the men into the hotel in their woman's toggery and spotted us in a minute. Miss Benton promised to take care of him and she seems to have done it, or he'd have got off to warn these fellows, which would have been ugly."

They walked on till they got to Naples, where the party broke up while the city was all in a flutter of excitement to see the captured brigands, especially the redoubtable and terrible Natali, of whom they had heard such wonderful accounts.

Lord Armitage went down to the mole to his own yacht and said to Keene before departing:

"Lady Armitage and myself will be delighted to see you this evening. By the by, that fellow Vargrave was taken aboard the yacht last night and has been in irons in the hold ever since. We might as well let him out now, mightn't we?"

"Certainly," replied Keene. "He can do us no more harm now. May I ask you a question or two, my lord?"

Lord Armitage bowed stiffly.

"But you mustn't expect me to answer if I don't choose."

"Certainly not. I only wish to ask you this: What made you help Conrad Burton and his friend to escape from France when you knew who they were?"

"I was asked by a woman whom I have always respected as an artist, and you know we Englishmen are fond of helping the escape of prisoners. That's all."

"May I ask another question?"

"If you like."

"What relation does that lady sustain to Conrad Burton?"

Lord Armitage laughed.

"Ah, that you must ask her. I never try to penetrate a lady's secrets. We shall expect you at sunset. Good-by."

Keene walked thoughtfully away and met Maurice Dulcie, who said:

"Where are you going?"

"To the prison. I'm going to find out that secret from Natali, if I have to frighten him into it."

"I wish you success, but you won't find out, I warn you."

"We shall see. Come along with me."

They went to the prison and found a tall gendarme pacing the corridor in front of a grating from which Natali was looking at him and talking in low tones.

The gendarme as they approached hurriedly pulled a cigar out of his mouth and held it so they could not see it, the smoke only betraying its presence.

Maurice turned to the sentry and asked:

"Where did you get that cigar?"

The man looked confused, dropped it behind him, and answered:

"The signor is mistaken. I have no cigar."

"What is that then?" asked Maurice, as he pointed to the glowing end on the stone pavement of the corridor.

"That! oh, yes, signor, it does seem to be a cigar. Yes. The prisoner gave it me and I thought I'd smoke it before the rounds came to my post. Don't tell the sergeant, signor, or I shall get three days."

Keene who had been watching Natali all the time noticed that he was very pale and seemed to be listening intently to the dialogue on so apparently trifling a subject, so he said to Maurice:

"It's no business of ours. Let the sentry smoke. We came here to see this man."

"Yes, yes, come in, gentlemen," cried Natali, with nervous impatience. "You have the entry I suppose. Come in and I will tell you all I know. Let us talk business. I don't want to be kept here if I can get out. The prefect and I understand each other perfectly. I shall not stay here long, I assure you. Come in."

He seemed to be anxious to get them into the cell, and Keene whispered:

"Don't go in. He wants it. Let's see what he will do."

Maurice nodded and said aloud:

"We came here to ask you to confess the full particulars of the murder of Mr. Conrad Vargrave, Natali. I have found the proof that you did it, and I have it in my pocket. If you'll write out a full confession, we will wink at your escape. Can I say that, Colonel Keene?"

Keene bowed his head.

"At least we will not interfere if the prefect wants you to escape."

The prisoner seemed to reflect a moment and at last he said:

"I'm willing, gentlemen. Come in and I will dictate a full confession."

Keene, full of excitement, tried the door and found it only barred on the outside.

The sentry unbarred it and let them in, and then resumed his walk up and down the corridor, while Natali began to talk glibly about his

embarrassment in not being able to receive such visitors properly.

Keene noticed that he kept glancing in a nervous sort of way at the door, and still listening to the tread of the sentry. At last he said, in a hurried, apologetic way:

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but I can only offer you the refreshment of smoking; for I am a cigar-maker by trade and will always keep the best in my pockets. Will you smoke, both of you?"

He looked straight at Maurice as he spoke and offered them a couple of cigars, which he took from his breast-pocket.

Keene accepted his and lighted it; Maurice, after a moment's hesitation, did the same, and a singular smile came over the face of Antonio Natali, as he said:

"Ask on, gentlemen. I'll tell you all that I know."

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

"In the first place," asked Colonel Keene, "who killed Mr. Vargrave?"

"No one, signor. It was an accident. The weapon with which he killed himself fell into the water after his death, and was never found."

"Who killed Mr. Peck, the lawyer, in the hotel of Paris?"

"He killed himself, signor."

Maurice interrupted him here to ask:

"Designedly or by accident?"

Natali laughed.

"By accident, of course. These things are always accidental. Now there is that man in the passage. He is liable at any moment to kill himself by his careless use of his firearms. Yet if he were found dead, some fools would say I did it, and the same of you, gentlemen; I suppose that you carry arms with you?"

"Yes," answered Maurice, and as he spoke he took out a revolver, cocked it, and pointed it toward Natali; "and I have made up my mind to use mine on you if you do not instantly answer my next question."

"Certainly, signor."

Natali seemed to be disturbed, but he kept up a brave front.

Maurice went to the door and called to the sentry, who came into full view, puffing energetically away at his cigar.

"Didn't I tell you not to smoke?" asked the young man, angrily. "Put that cigar out of your mouth, or you'll find cause to repent it. Here, give it to me."

The sentry hesitated and took a last draw to satisfy himself, when Maurice flung open the door, rushed at him and snatched away the cigar, which he trampled and ground angrily under his feet, to the amazement of both Keene and the sentry.

Then he came back to Natali, and held out to him his own cigar.

"Smoke that out, if you dare," he said. "It is just a quarter gone."

Natali drew back.

"Signor, I don't smoke other men's leavings."

"Then smoke this," said Maurice, in the same menacing way, pulling a cigar out of his vest pocket. "It came out of the box you keep hidden away in the rift of the cavern."

Natali turned paler than before.

"Signor, those cigars are too strong for me."

Maurice laughed and turned to Keene, who had been watching them intently.

"I see you've let your cigar out," he said, in a tone of jesting. "Don't light it again, but cut it open."

Natali uttered a sort of snarl like that of a wild beast, and crouched down in a corner, from which he glared out at them, half in rage, half in terror.

Keene uttered an oath of mingled joy and astonishment.

"By the gods, that's it! Why didn't we think of it before?"

As he spoke, he pulled out his knife and deliberately split open his own cigar, revealing for the first time the infernal machine that had been the cause of so many mysterious deaths, and would have been that of another had it not been for Maurice.

Wrapped up in the center of the cigar, close to the mouth-piece, was a small copper cartridge, such as goes into the cheapest of pistols, the bullet end toward the mouth of the smoker, the stuffing around it made loose, so as to make a free draught after the end was bitten off from the enveloping cigar.

Such a cigar might be smoked with perfect impunity till more than half consumed, when the heat of the glowing ash would at last ignite the cap of the cartridge.

At that moment the bullet must part, and if the cigar were still in the mouth of the smoker, it would have just force enough to enter the palate at the base of the skull and penetrate the spinal marrow.

Fired from a pistol the bullet wou'd have had greater penetration, but the walls of the copper cartridge offered sufficient resistance for the object of the machine; and its effects had already been manifested.

Colonel Keene looked at the cartridge and then at Maurice, lastly at Natali.

"Well," he said at last, "of all the villains ever I saw, you're the deepest, Natali. Now, then, what are you going to do, own up, or keep silent?"

The brigand glared at him as if fascinated.

"What's the use of owning up?" he asked, "you'll only hang me."

"Not if you understand your business as well as I think you do," answered Keene, drily. "See here, you and the prefect had it all made up for you to escape as soon as that sentry had killed himself, didn't you?"

"The prefect is a fool and a coward," snarled Natali. "But for him I should not be here. I've paid him money after money, and he never warned us. Well, what do you want with me?"

"A confession to use in America to save the honor of Conrad Burton," interrupted Dulcie. "We don't care what you do in Italy. We won't even betray what we have just found out if you'll give the confession. Now tell me, is Spencer Vargrave in this secret?"

"Of course he is. He became a member of the Camorra ten years ago, and we helped him get his fortune on the promise that he would assist us."

"Has he done so?"

"After a fashion. But we were getting to be dissatisfied. That's why they sent me after him to Paris and made him come here."

Natali made his answers sullenly and reluctantly, but he made them.

"Now," said Maurice sharply, "if we let you go and don't interfere with the prefect of police will you write us out a full history of that murder, seven years ago?"

Natali nodded.

"Yes, signor. I have been sorry for it ever since I engaged in the business, for Vargrave has not done what he promised. But for the fact that he was a member of our society, he would have been exposed long ago, but it was our secret, and we dared not reveal it for fear of the vengeance of the order. Now that it has been found out by accident I am not responsible. If you will write, signor, I will speak."

Maurice pulled out his note book and got ready to write when the brigand began his confession as follows:

"I first met Mr. Spencer Vargrave ten years ago, when he was traveling in Italy. I was then a member of the Camorra, and it was my business to entrap travelers into the hands of our bands for ransom to fill the treasury. I became his valet on purpose to entrap him, but soon found he was a worse man than even myself. He displayed a great curiosity about the Camorra, and was finally initiated into the order on my vouching for him and with the understanding that we should help him to acquire his father's wealth which should be used for the purposes of the order. He took me to America and put me in his father's service to compass the murder, while he went back to Europe. I soon found out that his father was becoming more and more indignant at the drafts he was making on his purse and the scandals of his life in Europe, and I wrote to him to come back at once, to pacify the old man. He wrote back to me that he would return on the next steamer and sent me this letter."

The brigand took from his pocket a dirty, ragged letter, which ran thus:

"NATALI: I shall return on the steamer of the 10th July. Finish the work by the 20th at latest. The cigar will do it best. SPENCER."

Colonel Keene looked at it and handed it back to Maurice, while the brigand went on:

"I have kept that all these years to use when the time came. You will notice a little cross after the word 'finish.' It looks like an accident, but it was put there designedly. It was an order I dared not disobey. I waited my time. The 17th of July was a hot day, and Mr. Vargrave was so much oppressed by the heat that he went to the summer-house by the water side in the evening to smoke his after-dinner cigar. I gave him one of my prepared cigars and went away. I saw him light it, heard him talking to his grandson, Conrad Burton, and heard a shot. I thought that the plot had been discovered by some accident, and that the cartridge had gone off prematurely, so I hurried to the screen of some lilac bushes to watch. Then I saw Mr. Conrad running to the woods in chase of a squirrel, and heard the old man laughing at his missing the shot. The elder Vargrave was then alive, and I saw him smoking while a man was rowing across the bay a few hundred yards from shore. I waited for five minutes. The judge frequently took the cigar from his mouth, and I feared it would go off on one of these occasions, but I have observed that it never does. It is the increased heat resulting from the last puffs that sets it off. It was more than half gone when I saw him sucking at it hard. In another moment there was a little puff, a sound like the tap of a small hammer, and he fell back dead, while the stump of the cigar fell into the water. Then I came away to the house, and did not go back till I took Hughes, the gardener, down to bring away the body. That is all. If you have written it I will sign it."

"That's not enough," interposed Keene. "Who gave Mr. Peck the cigar to which his death was due?"

"Spencer Vargrave; I saw him."

"Who placed the pistol on his table to brand him as a suicide?"

Natali laughed sardonically. "I did. There's no crime in that. Spencer Vargrave murdered him for fear he might find out our secret."

"What made him fear it?"

"Because one of our band, a cousin of mine, had turned traitor and told the secret to Conrad Burton. We found it out and killed my cousin to-day. He had the same name as myself."

"How do you know he told him?"

"Because we found that he and Burton were seen together, and Burton gave one of our comrades in Paris the signs of our order. That made us certain and it was important that the secret should get no further."

"Then why did you not kill Burton and the other Natali first?"

"We had no chance, signor, and we did not dare to let them be arrested by the police, for fear they should tell all. But they were marked and so were you."

"Upon my word," observed Dulcie, "you seem to have marked a good many for slaughter, my friend."

"It was necessary, signor. The secrets of the Camorra must be kept, while it is possible, for the sake of Italy."

Keene looked at Dulcie and neither could help a smile to hear the villain before them talk about "the sake of Italy."

Natali looked as if he thought he had done a virtuous action.

Maurice presented him the paper that contained his confession, and the brigand signed it without hesitation, remarking:

"The secret has been discovered, and the Camorra cannot blame me."

Then they went away from the prison, Dulcie warning the sentry to take no more cigars from the prisoner if he valued his life, a warning the man took with many expressions of gratitude.

Then they went down to the mole and found a boat waiting to take them to the Enchantress, on reaching which the first person they saw was Spencer Vargrave, walking the deck uneasily and looking at the shore as if he hardly knew what to do with himself.

He scowled at them as they came aboard, but Colonel Keene addressed him sweetly:

"Good-day, Mr. Vargrave. Why don't you go ashore, sir? We don't want you any further now. Did you pass the night pleasantly?"

Vargrave scowled worse than before.

"You had something to do with this," he said, viciously. "I'm going to write to the minister and see if Americans can be kidnapped with impunity."

"Before you write," said Keene, coldly, "be sure other writings of yours may not come up to condemn you for your work seven years ago. If I may advise you, I should recommend you to beg one of Natali's cigars, such as you gave to Mr. Peck in Paris. It may save you from the gallows, or from the guillotine if you prefer to be tried in France."

Vargrave turned blue as he listened, and tried to smile, but the effort was a ghastly failure.

"I don't know what you mean?" he said.

"Go ashore then, if you dare, and find out," interrupted Maurice, fiercely, shaking the confession of Natali at him. "You are found out at last, and justice will be done now. Come, Keene."

They turned away and went into the cabin. The last thing they saw of Spencer Vargrave he was pacing the deck like a wild beast in a cage, looking at the shore, while the boat lay alongside the yacht.

In the cabin were Lord and Lady Armitage, Conrad Burton and the lady whom Dulcie had hitherto known as Miss Benton, but with whom he had not exchanged a word since their memorable interview in New York, some months before.

Lord Armitage greeted the two gentlemen politely and then glancing at Maurice said with the delicacy of a high-bred man:

"I think from the expression of your faces, gentlemen, that you have some business with your friends which you may desire to be private. If so Lady Armitage and myself will pay a visit to our friends on the Magic."

"By no means," answered Maurice steadily. "The news I have to tell must be told to all the world to do any good. I bear in my hand the full confession of the brigand Antonio Natali of the way in which Mr. Conrad Vargrave was killed seven years ago, and I give that confession now into the hands of Mr. Conrad Burton, who has been falsely accused and convicted of this murder. If you will permit me I will read it aloud."

Miss Benton had half risen from her seat with parted lips and whispered:

"Go on, for God's sake. Don't keep us in suspense any more."

Thus adjured, Maurice read out the confession and then placed it and the letter in the hands of Conrad Burton.

When he had finished the silence was broken by Lord Armitage saying with practical British common sense:

"But I say, that fellow Vargrave—if that's true he ought to be arrested at once. I let him out this morning."

Even as he spoke they heard a fall on the deck above and the bustle of feet as men rushed aft.

Colonel Keene put up his hand.

"Listen. I think Vargrave has saved the law some trouble. Let us go up."

They went on deck and found some sailors raising the body of Vargrave from the deck. He was dead, with a few drops of blood at the corner of his mouth.

"How did this happen?" asked Armitage.

"Please, my lord," answered one of the men touching his hat, "it was the most strangest thing I ever see'd. The gent was jest a-walkin' up and down smokin', and all on a sudden we heard a little puff and crack and he throwed up his hands and fell back dead."

Keene quietly picked up from the deck the little cartridge case blackened with powder, and showed them the scraps of tobacco scattered round, saying:

"Now you see how it is done. He has cheated the guillotine and gallows at once. So much the better for the family."

Maurice Dulcie, three days later, is standing in the forum of the ruins of Pompeii, and beside him are Conrad Burton and a beautiful lady with large gray eyes and blonde hair.

He had been alone, and these two had come on him unawares, as he stood gloomily looking at the old inscriptions on the walls. When he saw them, he raised his hat gravely and was turning to go away when Conrad Burton stopped him by saying:

"Mr. Dulcie, what is the matter with you?" Can we not be friends you and I after what you have done for me?"

Maurice turned away his eyes.

"I did not do it for you, sir," he said, "and you owe me no thanks."

"But I do," interrupted Miss Benton in her impulsive ardent way, "and you are ungenerous to avoid me that I may not thank you."

He raised his eyes to her face with a look of undisguised anger.

"Yes, you owe me thanks," he said, "for I did it all for you, and what is my reward now?"

"What reward would you have?" she asked with a singular smile.

"One I can never get," he answered shortly.

"You see I am frank. It needs no spectacles to see that you love the very ground this gentleman walks on, and if I was fool enough to hope that I might be preferred to him my eyes are opened now. The only favor I ask of you is to leave me alone. You know my secret. Don't use it to torment me."

He was turning away when she said with the same singular smile:

"Upon my word, Conrad, one would think he was in love with me. You must ask him his intentions."

"They are, to go away to-morrow," said Maurice irritated beyond endurance by what he regarded as heartless jesting. "You and your husband can laugh at me in my absence, but you shall not do it in my presence if I can help it."

"My husband," she echoed, and as she spoke she laid her hand on his arm for he was going. "Why bless the man! Don't you know I'm not married—yet?"

"But you soon will be," he retorted. "I only hope you'll be happy with this gentleman. I can say no more."

She burst out laughing.

"With this gentleman," she echoed. "Why this is my brother!"

Maurice started, turned scarlet and then pale as he faltered:

"What a fool I've been! But I never knew you had a brother. Thank God I saved him. But why did you not go by his name?"

"Because I forbid it," said Conrad. "Beatrice is my half-sister by a former marriage of my father, and at my imprisonment I wrote to her to change her name that no one might reproach her with being a convict's sister. She did so and has worked to save me ever since. Thanks to you she has succeeded."

"And it is time for me to keep my promise," said Beatrice smiling. "You can claim your reward if you care for it."

And she held out both hands.

THE END.

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